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"WILFRED, THIS WOMAN SAYS SHE IS YOUR WIFE!"

AN IDOL OF CLAY;

Or, The Love That Never Was Told.

BY HARRIET IRVING.

CHAPTER I.

BUT SHE IS PASSING FAIR.

ON a cold windy night in late autumn, two

men were sitting in a cosy little smoking-room in a house somewhere in the vicinity of Fifth avenue and Central Park.

This mansion (for such it might well be called) was one of those few where wealth and refinement go hand in hand.

In spite of the costly furniture and magnificent works of art with which every room was stored, an air of home-comfort pervaded the whole.

One felt that, though the chairs were of the most richly carved and inlaid wood, and covered with the richest satin or velvet, they nevertheless were made for use, and formed most comfortable seats.

It was the same in everything else. The beautiful reigned supreme, but comfort was studied as well, and they must have been hard indeed to please who would not have pronounced this New York mansion a perfect gem in its way.

Almost every description of style was represented without being carried to extreme; and the blendings of the æsthetic sage-green and terra-cotta red with brighter hues, the mixtures of rare old china, magnificent bronzes, and sweet-scented flowers, showed that the house was inhabited by people of no small artistic gifts.

The lucky owners of this lovely home were a certain Mrs. Chester, her son, and her niece.

Mrs. Chester had been a widow many years, with a very bountiful income, her husband having made a fortune by speculation in grain.

He had been the younger son of a poor but good family, and by steady application for many years to his business, and a few successful speculations, he managed to amass a considerable fortune.

After he became rich he married a young lady who was many years his junior, and the niece of an Irish millionaire.

Some fifteen years after the birth of their only child he died rather suddenly, leaving behind him an unstained name and a fortune of several hundred thousand dollars, safely invested at good rates of interest.

Mrs. Chester, at the time of which we speak, was a stately lady of about sixty, with a kindly, intellectual, high-bred face, and soft masses of silvered hair. She had adopted her niece, Constance Clare, on the death of the latter's father some few months before; and Constance, being left an orphan, gladly accepted her aunt's offer.

Richard Chester, her only child, was one of the two men before mentioned; and it is on this stormy night, as he sits smoking before the fire of his own peculiar sanctum, that we would introduce him to the reader.

Imagine a small, snug room, plainly and comfortably furnished, the walls literally covered by a strange assortment of whips, dog-collars, guns, revolvers, statuettes, portraits of great race-horses and beautiful women, and a large bookcase full of well-read volumes of all kinds, from the Bible to the Koran, from Beecher's sermons to Byron's poems, from the "Guide to the Turf" to Shakespeare.

Drawn close up to the fire is a table, scattered with numerous newspapers, and also

bearing a good collection of pipes, tobacco, and cigars, with one or two decanters.

On one side of the fireplace, lying lazily back in his chair, is Richard Chester, a well-made, tall, aristocratic-looking man, who, without being what could be called handsome, had an intellectual, high-bred look and air, which must have distinguished him anywhere.

Handsome he was not, yet his was a face very hard to forget; kind and clever, always grave, almost to sadness when in repose, but lighting up readily with a very winning smile.

His Irish ancestry betrayed itself in his great blue eyes and black hair and mustache, and in his warm, passionate nature, although the latter was habitually hidden by a certain air of indifference or weariness.

In fact, Chester had passed the first flush of his youth, being thirty-five years old, and had now settled down to lead a tolerably steady life, after sowing more than an ordinary measure of wild oats.

It was his misfortune to be born rich, and therefore to have no incentive to work.

Had he been forced to devote himself entirely to any one of the arts with which he now amused himself, the world would have rung with his name.

For besides rare talent, he had inherited his father's perseverance and business capabilities, that would have forced that talent to its place in the front rank.

As it was, he was a first-class judge of a painting, a statue, a play, an opera, a woman, or a horse; painted well, considering that he was only an amateur, was passionately fond of music, and sung well, was always polite to the fair sex, and was one of the best riders and drivers in the Park.

He had a wide knowledge of both men and books, and knew more or less of many of the occult sciences.

His companion was a very different man, and yet those two were firm friends.

Cecil Vaughan was a good-looking, fair young man, some five or six years Chester's junior, with an easy, gentlemanly manner, and just a dash of devil-may-care grace entirely his own.

He was a careless, good hearted, unselfish fellow, with a wonderfully quick intelligence and a facility of being able to talk upon every subject by the hour, so that he appeared to know all about it, even if he had never heard of it before.

He was one of a large family, and held a responsible position in the custom-house, with a salary of eighteen hundred a year; and besides this, he was as ready with his pen as with his tongue, adding thereby to his income not a

little by writing chatty paragraphs for the Society papers.

"What are you going to do with yourself to-night, Chester?" he asks.

"Nothing," replies Chester. "I'm tired. My mother and Constance have an engagement, but I shall stay at home."

"Why don't you go to the theater?"

"My dear fellow, I'm heartily tired of the drama for the present. This Shakespearian revival I have already seen twice; and as for the modern melodrama, with its inevitable murder and forgery, its innocent victim and villainous heavy man; comic opera, with pretty airs and pretty girls; and burlesque, with its word-torturing puns and slangy songs, I am tired of them all. I want a thorough change."

"A change, how—dramatically or socially?"

"I was speaking dramatically then. I should like, I think, to see one of those dramas which amused our grandfathers."

"Surely you *have* seen them—'The Rivals,' 'She Stoops to Conquer,' or later the 'Lady of Lyons,' 'Money?'"

"Oh, I don't mean those. They are plays which are suitable for any age, and will live for almost all time. I was alluding to the plays of a second-rate order, which ran for a time; and then, as the nation became more enlightened and wanted consistency as well as excitement, were laid on the shelf and forgotten."

"I know the kind of thing you mean exactly. They are often unearthed and played at the minor theaters."

"I don't think so," returned Chester, taking up a daily paper and running his eye down the theatrical advertisements "under the clock."

"I don't see any of them mentioned here."

"No, perhaps not. But then, every theater does not advertise in the daily papers."

"Most of them do."

"But not all. Did you ever hear of the — Museum?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Let us go there to-night!" exclaimed Vaughan, struck by a bright idea. "I don't know what they're playing, but it's pretty sure to be of the kind you want to see. Come!"

"I will. Where is this place?"

"Well, somewhere around the Bowery."

"An aristocratic neighborhood! Well, I'll go. I confess I have some curiosity to see a real old-fashioned melodrama. We needn't stay long, of course."

The two started.

On how little one's fate depends! A breath of wind, a moment's hurry or delay, and who shall say what may be the result?

Had not Richard Chester expressed his care-

less wish that night, the current of three lives might have been completely changed.

Vaughan knew his way everywhere in the city, and after they left the car, led his companion down several of the low slums that lie in lower New York.

Fortunately, Chester was not fastidious, and enjoyed the novelty of his walk; it was so thoroughly unlike anything he had experienced before in the course of his theater-going.

"Look! there's a play-bill!" said Vaughan, stopping before the dirt-grimed window of a rag-and-bone shop.

Chester read it with some curiosity and a good deal of amusement:

"BOYD'S MUSEUM.

"MR. DUNCAN MONTROSE,

"Sole Lessee and Manager.

"On Saturday, November 2d, and the five following nights, will be produced the celebrated English drama of intense interest, by the late Samuel Smith, Esq., entitled:

"A BLOODY DEED;

"OR,

"THE FATAL FINGER-MARKS ON THE COTTAGE GATE."

"There's excitement!" said Vaughan, laughing.

And then he continued reading from the bill:

"Act I—The Murder. Act II—The Accusation. Act III—The Innocent Victim. Act. IV—Justice.' And just look at the scenes: 'The Cottage Garden—The Thieves' Kitchen—The Madhouse Cellar, with spectral effects—The Mill Stream, with cascade of real water—The Drawing-room at the Castle—The Prison Yard—The Gallows—The House on Fire.'"

"Come along!" said Chester. "I'm quite anxious to see this wonderful piece."

"One moment! Just look at the prices! See how absurdly low they are! Private boxes, three dollars; reserved seats in the parquet and circle, fifty cents; family circle a quarter, and the gallery ten cents. Oh, that's too ridiculous! Fifty cents for a seat in the parquet!"

And both men laughed at what to them was a joke.

A turn or two more brought them to the theater—an unpretentious little house, its facade literally covered by the flaring picture posters which were supposed to represent the most thrilling incidents of the drama being played within.

The two men paid their money, and were shown by a civil usher round the house, and into the stage-box on the right, or, theatrically speaking, the "O. P." side of the stage.

The box was certainly not furnished in the manner they had been accustomed to, but it was clean and comfortable; and having settled themselves in their seats, Chester and his friend prepared to enjoy the play.

The first act being finished before they arrived, they criticised for a short time a very well painted act drop, and proceeded to "take stock" of the rest of the audience.

The gallery seemed to be pretty well filled, chiefly by bare-legged boys who had the appearance of having come to the theater because it was warmer there than in the streets; below the gallery was a circle in which were several well-dressed people of the well-to-do laborer type; while the orchestra seats were occupied by young men and girls who had come chiefly in couples, and sat with their arms entwined, hand in hand, only relaxing the affectionate embrace when a hand was required to assist in the cracking of peanuts, or the sucking of oranges and sweets.

Presently the band, which had been discouraging anything but strains calculated to soothe the savage breast during the *entr'acte*, finished with two or three lively bars while the curtain slowly rose.

It disclosed a somewhat dirty set scene, representing a dingy room, about which five ragged men were lounging. This was of course the thieves' kitchen alluded to on the bills.

During two or three lines of conversation, the "heavy man" informed the "utilitarian" and the three "supers" of the murder he had committed, and his wish to get "the girl" into his power.

Then the door at the back was dashed open, and the girl in question, otherwise the leading lady, entered, having thus foolishly rushed into the midst of danger, because her lover had been falsely accused of the murder, and she had come thus alone and single-handed, to try, first by entreaties then by threats, to make the real culprit confess his guilt.

She was an undoubtedly handsome woman this leading lady, tall and graceful, with magnificent dark eyes, a wealth of nut-brown hair floating over her shoulders, white, rounded arms, and well-proportioned figure of the large Junoesque type. A fine, clever-looking woman, with strength of character and depth of purpose in every line of her expressive if not strictly beautiful face, she was even in private life; but on the stage, where of course she was "made up," she was simply lovely.

As she entered, Chester leaned forward in his box, and did not remove his eyes from her until the closing in "flats" shut her from view at the end of the scene.

That she was a clever, painstaking artist Chester saw at the first glance, particularly when, goaded to desperation by the "heavy man's" repeated refusals, she rose to her feet and with intense tragic power bade him beware.

The "heavy man" played well too, and laughed scornfully.

"Beware of what?" he asked.

"Beware of *me*," she replied, in her sweet, powerful voice. "Yes, you may sneer, Jacob Cave, but my hour will yet come! The worm when trodden on will turn, and there is One who will aid my weak arm so that it shall be as strong, ay, stronger than yours!"

The language for her part was for the most part stilted and high-flown, but she seemed to invest even her greatest "lengths" with a touch of nature, and when the scene ended leaving her fainting in the power of the thieves, the applause was so genuine that even Chester joined in it.

"Have you had enough of this?" asked Vaughan, yawning. "I have; let us go."

"No," returned Chester; "I am interested; let us stay."

And stay they did, until the curtain fell upon the second of the "two great dramas" which were nightly presented at the museum.

CHAPTER II.

AN IDOL MADE OF CLAY.

MISS HELEN ROSSMORE, the leading lady, ran from the stage directly after the curtain fell for the last time, and hastened to her dressing-room to prepare to return home.

She was very weary, and her head ached terribly.

Both the parts she had been playing were long and exciting, and now, when all was over, the after effects were visible, and she was no longer the persecuted heroine, the tragedy queen, only a tired woman longing for her home and rest, who had a weary walk before her.

Although she was playing the "lead," her salary was very small, only twenty dollars per week (out of which she had all her dresses to find), and that after seven years' hard toil. For Helen Rossmore had entered the profession at seventeen, and now she was twenty-four.

She lived in cheap rooms not far from Sixth avenue, a long way from the theater; but she was accustomed to walk the distance at least twice out of the four times a day she was obliged to travel it, and on this particular night she was going to walk home.

She had a great deal to do with the small sum of money she earned, for there was the rent to pay and her home to keep, and both her husband and her blind father depended almost entirely on her for support, so she was compelled to be very careful indeed in her own personal expenditure.

As has been said before, she was very tired to-night; her head was dizzy and confused; the part she had been studying for the next night

rung in her ears and a hysterical sensation made her long for tears to come to relieve her burning eyes. But Helen was not one of those kind of women that easily weep, and she stifled the feeling bravely.

When she got out of the theater (which was dark and cold, now that all the lights were out), she passed beneath the entrance, and looked anxiously up and down the street, wrapping her fur-lined cloak round her the while, for the wind blew rather chill.

She had had some lingering hope that perhaps her husband might come to meet her; but no, he was not there, and so she set off with a sigh on her lonely walk.

She loved him so passionately, so intensely, so devotedly, that had he been there, thus showing an ordinary amount of care and thought for her, she would have looked upon it as godlike, and have valued this simple act far above all other things. As it was, she was too loyal and true to harbor, if only for an instant, one unkind thought against him.

She was foolish—nay, worse, she was selfish and unkind, she thought, to expect him to be there.

In fact, no woman ever loved her husband more devotedly, or with more utter disregard of self, than did Helen; and few women, alas! have ever wasted the wealth of their love upon a more worthless object.

Wilfred Avondale was not a bad man, as the term goes; that is to say, he was neither a forger, murderer, thief, swindler, or even drunkard. No, he was simply shallow, weak-minded, cowardly, selfish and vain, without industry or enterprise enough to commit a great crime, but a man who, if he had no real vices, had certainly few virtues.

He was an artist by profession, and had but little application, and no settled method. He would begin half a dozen different pictures one after the other, and finish none of them; or if by any chance one was completed, he never made the least endeavor to get it sold.

Picture dealers would try to drive bargains with him, and he would end by taking himself out of their presence in a fit of childish temper.

Sometimes a picture would be sold for about a fifth of its real value, but as a rule they remained leaning against the walls of his studio in an unfinished state, or were hastily made to look something like done, and carried to the nearest pawnbroker's, where the sum lent on them would do little more than pay for the canvas and colors.

And yet Wilfred Avondale had talents which might have earned a name and fortune for him, if only, instead of frittering his time away in childish day-dreams of future greatness and in writing milk and-water doggerel, he

had set himself steadily to work, as many another man had done before him.

But he would not do that. He was a genius (according to his own account), and could not descend to paint "pot-boilers."

Let his wife toil and slave ever so hard, it did not matter. Some day he would be rich and famous, and then, of course, she could rest.

He was painting a picture now that would "make" him. The Academy would "hang" it; the world would be electrified by it. So he would talk on, and very likely the next day would say that that picture was not so good as the one he was just going to begin, and so it would be laid aside and forgotten.

Helen, although no genius at the brush, had artistic taste, and having learned drawing at school, and watched her husband at his easel, knew something of the art, and had often made one of his unfinished pictures look sufficiently presentable to be sent to the "uncle of the golden balls."

Besides her husband (who, as will be easily seen, brought little grist to the mill, and took a great deal out of it), Helen had also to assist, as has been stated above, in supporting her father, who shared their home.

Mr. Rossmore (Helen retained her maiden name professionally), had been a musician of some attainments, had had several pupils, conducted an orchestra, and occasionally made a little money by his own compositions; but bad times had come.

He had never been a business man, and when his sight suddenly failed him, and he became hopelessly blind, he was totally dependent on his daughter.

To be sure, he would still at times earn a little, for his skill with the violin was undiminished, and at concerts, etc., his solos were always encored. But he was getting old, and his blindness made him unable to keep pace with the times; so engagements were few and far between, though he still struggled on, doing whatever he could to prevent himself being wholly dependent on his daughter.

Helen hurried along, thinking sadly of the past when the future had looked so bright, and she had built such castles in the air of what would be when her husband had made his name, fame and fortune, as she had so confidently expected he would, if only the first step in the road to greatness could be taken.

Now, alas! she had learned by bitter experience that her hopes were indeed but castles in Spain, never probably to be realized; but her loyalty to her husband never for an instant swerved on this account—it was not his fault, poor fellow, but rather that of adverse circumstances, and the non-application of his genius.

When she came to the City Hall Park she hesitated for a minute whether to go through or around it; she had been annoyed more than once by men loafing around on the seats, and who seeing her alone and unprotected, thought they had the right to speak to her, or even to insult her with offensive remarks as she hurried by them.

A coffee-stall was drawn up against one of the buildings, and as she hurriedly passed, the fragrance of the hot coffee struck gratefully on her senses. She passed, and felt inclined to envy the newspaper-boy who, free from the trammels of society, stood before the stall, drinking his cent's worth of hot coffee with infinite relish.

"If no one was about, I'd have some," thought Helen; "but in this crowd it is not to be thought of."

And then she left the lights and people behind her and set off through the Park.

It was dark and lonely, but she walked fast, and the rapid pace banished the cold and restored circulation.

When she had nearly reached the other side of the Park, she became aware some one was following her.

She stopped and looked back.

A tall, thoroughly gentlemanly-looking man was coming toward her with long, regular strides, and, just as she resumed her way, he was beside her.

It was Richard Chester, who, having parted with his friend, had set himself to the task of following the handsome actress who had won his admiration.

He knew too much of the theatrical world to believe that a woman must needs be abandoned because she was on the stage, for he knew of many actors and actresses who were models whom any woman might be proud to copy.

But it was not the fashion of his "set" to think well of professional ladies, and therefore he had determined to make the acquaintance of Helen Rossmore.

When she found he was following her she hurried on faster than ever; but he kept beside her, and presently spoke.

"It's rather cold to-night."

"Yes, it is," spoken very shortly.

"Have you far to go?"

"I don't see that's any business of yours."

She was tired, and, truth to tell, hungry, too, and spoke sharply. It irritated her beyond measure that almost every third man she met would speak to her, just because it was her lot to be out alone late at night.

Chester, with all his faults, was a thorough gentleman, and raised his hat, as he replied:

"I beg your pardon; I see I have made a mistake. I am sure I can never apologize sufficiently. Good-night!"

And he fell behind to allow her to pass, which she did rapidly.

"A very handsome and a very clever woman," was his mental comment as he lit a cigar. "Wonder if she's married? By Jove! I'll go and see her again to-morrow night!"

Meanwhile, Helen hastened on her way homeward, and in a comparatively short space of time reached the by-street where her home was situated.

She admitted herself by a latch-key, and then went slowly into the front room on the ground floor, which served as a sitting-room, the back parlor, with which it communicated by folding doors, being furnished as a bedroom.

They also rented the drawing-room floor, Mr. Rossmore sleeping in the back room; and the front room, a large apartment with two high windows, and possessing that artistic desideratum, a "north light," being used as a studio.

Helen entered the shabby little parlor, and sunk wearily on the hard horse-hair sofa.

There were two persons in the room—her husband and father—who had been deeply engaged in some conversation which her entrance had interrupted.

Her husband looked up as she sunk on the sofa, and the light from the shaded reading-lamp streamed on his face. He was a wonderfully handsome man, according to some people's ideas of beauty, though others thought that the almost purely Greek profile and fair, curling hair resembled a barber's block in no small measure, and that the weak, drooping mouth, good complexion, and light bluish-gray eyes were decidedly effeminate.

"Helen," he said, "I've had such an idea—a glorious one—an inspiration—it will make me famous!"

Her cold, numbed fingers were trying to undo the clasp of her fur mantle, and refused their task.

He saw her difficulty, but never thought of helping her; and she, although so weary in mind and body that her senses were dazed and her limbs ached, made an effort to appear interested in what interested him.

"Another idea?" she said. "Is it for a picture or a poem?"

Her father, whose sense of hearing was quickened by his love, detected the weariness in the tone she tried so hard to render cheerful.

"Are you very tired, dear?" he asked.

"Yes, I am tired; but never mind. What is your idea, Wilfred?"

"It will be a masterpiece," he exclaimed, with boyish enthusiasm, "illustrating Scott's 'Young Lochinvar.' I have it all clearly sketched before my mind's eye. A stately hall, with a groined roof and rich oak carv-

ings for a background, with here and there a colored ray of light breaking through the stained glass windows of the background, and falling on the polished floor of the middle distance. There is a rare chance for rich coloring in the dresses of the bridesmaids and attendants, who are grouped against the almost black wall. The bride's father, with his hand on his sword, her mother in tears, and the bridegroom with his bonnet and plume, are together in the left-hand corner; and almost in the middle, just in the broad stream of light from the open door on the right, are Lochinvar and Ellen hand-in-hand, while a golden and jeweled goblet lies at his feet. Through the doorway is seen a small vestibule, and beyond that another door, where the horse stands waiting. Is not the idea good?"

"Capital!" said Helen, warmly, for she was a firm believer in her husband's talents. "Work hard at it, dear. I'm sure it will be successful!"

"Do you go out in the morning?"

"Yes; there's a ten o'clock call. I must leave here about a quarter-past nine."

"Very well; when you've finished rehearsals, I want you to get me another canvas, thirty-six by forty-eight, and a large tube of white and one of crimson lake; I think that's all."

Helen ventured a mild protest.

"Wilfred," she said, humbly, as though she was asking a favor, "can't you wait until Saturday, dear? It's treasury day, you know; and, really, I am so short."

"Oh, very well," he said sulkily; "by Saturday the idea may have passed, never to return, and my chance of fame be gone by forever. Oh, Heaven!" he added, starting up with a mixture of boyish impatience and melodramatic rage; "the torture of being bound down by these paltry, every-day, sordid cares—the cage that forbids the bird to fly!"

His metaphors were apt to be hazy at times. To a cool observer he would simply have appeared now as a weak, pitiful fool, who tried to pose as a genius; but Helen saw no fault in him. What spell was it that bound her to this man with such a devoted love, and made her, so far-seeing and clear-sighted as a rule, blind to all his faults?

She thought for a moment, and then said, "Very well, dear; I'll endeavor to get you the canvas and colors. I'm so tired now; let us go to bed."

Wilfred got his canvas the next day, as she promised; but the people at the theater noticed—though her husband did not—that although she appeared at rehearsal the next morning in her fur-lined cloak (the only really handsome garment she possessed), in the evening she wore a shabby cloth jacket; nor was the cloak seen again for some time.

CHAPTER III.

IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

RICHARD CHESTER dreamed that night of Helen Rossmore, and thought of her two or three times during the following day.

It was very ridiculous, he thought, that he who had seen some of the most beautiful and distinguished women in the world, should think twice of this obscure actress in a third-rate theater—a woman, too, who had not even classical beauty to recommend her.

He was interested in her, he told himself; and it must be added that the rebuff she had given him on the preceding night had raised her considerably in his estimation.

Yes; he was decidedly interested in her. She had talent, and it was a pity such talent could not be more widely known and admired.

He had some interest in theatrical quarters, and it would not be the first time he had assisted in getting some ambitious lady an engagement.

At any rate, he would go to the theater again and see if his first favorable impressions were realized.

He went, and saw her as the guilty heroine of "East Lynne."

Helen was assuredly an emotional actress, and this part fitted her admirably. Whether in the earlier scenes, when *Lady Isabel* is tortured by jealous doubts of her husband and the ghost of her old dead love for her cousin; or when, in the hotel scene, she finally parts with *Levison*, and then gives herself up to despair, with one heart-rending cry of "Alone, utterly alone, forever more!" or when, as the disguised *Madame Vine*, she meets her husband and children; when by the deathbed of her child she falls, exclaiming: "Dead! dead! and he never knew me—never called me mother!" or when she at last dies herself—in every scene alike Helen was perfect.

The afterpiece was a pretty little drama called "Temptation; or, the Ticket-of-Leave Woman," and here again she strengthened the good impression she had already made.

Chester left that night more pleased than ever, and returned again on the following night.

On the Saturday night "East Lynne" and "Temptation" were produced. On Wednesday "Romeo and Juliet" and the "Hunter of the Alps" were to be played—a heavy night's work, indeed, for the leading lady.

For a wonder, Wilfred decided to go with his wife, not so much from anxiety about her as because he had nothing else to do and felt too lazy to do work.

Helen, however, was delighted at his proposal, and flattered herself it was made because he knew she would be extra tired that night.

Chester, from his seat behind the curtains of his box, watched her carefully.

It was the first time he had seen her in "legitimate" drama, and he was an able critic.

She came out of the ordeal well.

She was not an "ideal" *Juliet*—far from it—and her reading of the part had many faults, but she had grasped the right conception of the character.

She thoroughly gave the idea of a loving girl transformed into a heart-broken, frenzied woman; and when the curtain fell, Chester was among the first to applaud.

In the after-piece, a pretty little drama, in two acts, Helen represented the starving wife of the *Hunter of the Alps*, and her evident languor and weariness were not unsuited to the role.

As she left the theater her husband joined her; and they set off on their homeward walk together.

Chester had seen their meeting, and at once decided their relationship.

He was conscious of a slight pang. Was it of disappointment or of keener pain? But he lit a cigar. As his road lay in the same direction as theirs, he followed them at some distance until they started to cross the Park.

Helen was very silent. Truth to tell, she was more utterly exhausted both in mind and body than she cared to own. She had had a long rehearsal in the morning, had then to hasten home and scheme and plan to lay out her little income to the best advantage; then, after paying sundry small debts and facing two impatient creditors, whose demands she was then unable to satisfy, she had to return to the theater, to play perhaps the most trying part ever written.

She felt utterly exhausted; nevertheless, she struggled on bravely. When they were about half across the Park, she stopped suddenly, drawing her breath with a little gasp, and caught his arm.

"Wait a moment, dear," she said. "I—I'm afraid I am going to faint."

He put his arm around her in some consternation; but his first thought, as usual, was of himself.

"For Heaven's sake don't faint here!" he said. "What should I do if you did?"

She tried to smile at him reassuringly, staggered a few paces, and then slipped from his arm, and fell prone on the walk.

Wilfred was thoroughly frightened now; and as he had none of that most useful commodity, presence of mind, he had not the least idea what to do.

Richard Chester, who, as we before said, was some little distance behind them, saw what had happened, and rushed forward to offer his

assistance, and to him Wilfred Avondale gratefully turned.

"The lady has fainted," Chester said, taking in the situation at a glance; and opening his overcoat, he produced a small silver flask, and poured some of the spirit it contained between Helen's lips.

It had the desired effect; for in a few moments she sighed, opened her eyes with a startled look in their depths, and asked, faintly, where she was.

Then, as recollection returned, she took her husband's proffered hand, and rose and leaned upon his arm.

"You are better now," said Chester, kindly. "You fainted, you remember."

"Yes," she said, slowly; "and you came to my aid, I suppose. How can I thank you?"

"By saying no more about such a trifling service," he said. "Any one would have done as much as I did under the circumstances; but in this case it was a pleasure."

"We are very much obliged to you," said Wilfred. "Do you think you can walk to the street, Helen, and then we'll get a hack for you?"

But Helen remembered the expense, and declared she would rather walk.

Chester guessed how matters stood, and with ready tact came to the rescue.

"You would rather walk!" he exclaimed. "I am sorry to hear that. I am going to call a carriage, and I was in hopes that, as we were probably both going up-town, you would favor me with your company. The truth is," he added, casting about for an excuse, "I have a particular objection to riding alone at night; I am nervous, in fact. Will you not take pity on me?"

His excuse was very transparent. He certainly did not look a nervous man; and a quick look of gratitude flashed from Helen's dark eyes told him that she saw through his ruse and appreciated his delicacy.

He accordingly hailed a passing carriage, and then, before telling the hackman where to drive, said, in a most matter-of-fact way, as if he had for the moment forgotten where they lived, "By the by, what is your address?"

Wilfred gave it him, and they drove off. Helen lay back, pale and speechless, on the seat, while her husband and Chester entered into conversation.

Wilfred was the kind of man who is always ready to confide his affairs to the first person willing to listen to him; and although the drive to H street was far from a long one, yet before their destination was reached Chester had heard a pretty correct outline of their lives, and his quick wit and knowledge of the world filled in the details.

When the hack stopped before the dingy

little house, Chester assisted Helen to alight; and while Wilfred opened the door with the latch-key, he asked, not addressing his words to either of them in particular, "May I do myself the pleasure of calling to-morrow to inquire if Miss Rossmore has quite recovered?"

"We shall be very glad to see you," Wilfred returned; "we shall be proud—"

His words somehow seemed to offend Helen's innate good taste, and she cut him short by saying, "We are only poor people, Mr. Chester" (he had given them his card); "but we can at least give you a hearty welcome. I am sure neither my husband nor I will ever forget your kindness to me to-night."

"Oh, pray don't mention that again, or I shall not come! Good-night!" he said, rather hurriedly, for he bated nothing so much as thanks.

And springing into his hack he was driven away.

"A very handsome and sensible woman," he decided, when he was alone. "I'm very glad to have made her acquaintance. What a pity she is tied to that egotistical idiot of a husband, who evidently thinks himself a Shakespeare and Michael Angelo combined! What a clever, pleasant creature she might be made if she were only away from him, and with some congenial companion, traveling, for instance, on the Continent! Ah, well! I suppose it's too late now; but it might have been!"

And, as he thought, the beautiful lines of one of the sweetest and most simple poems ever penned rose in his mind:

"Sometimes her narrow kitchen-walls
Stretched away into stately halls;
The weary wheel to a spinnet turned,
The tallow candle an astral burned;
And for him who sat in the chimney lug,
Groaning and grumbling o'er pipe and mug,
A manly form by her side she saw,
And joy was duty, and love was law.
Then she took up the burden of life again,
Saying only, 'It might have been!'
Alas for the maiden! alas for the judge!
For the rich repiner, and household drudge!
God pity them both, and pity us all,
Who vainly the dreams of our youth recall;
For of all sad words of tongue and pen,
The saddest of all are, 'It might have been!'"

On the next day, which was Sunday, Helen felt almost entirely recovered, and set about preparing for their expected visitor.

She had no idea what time he would come, so from early morning the room was kept tidy. Even Wilfred's studio (as the empty room which contained only the easel, two chairs, a small table, and a collection of rubbish, was called) was swept and garnished in honor of his coming.

Helen was very vexed lest she should be thought to fail in hospitality, but she saw at once she would be unable to set any solid refreshment before her visitor.

She might certainly have afforded to buy some viands; but, then, the shabby table equipage was not such as one could set before a man who lived on Fifth avenue and spent thirty thousand a year.

So she had to content herself with buying some brandy and whisky (wine she decided to do without, as she knew she could not afford to get it good), and placed it on the sideboard in her landlady's blown-glass decanters.

This was arranged pretty early in the day; but it was not until seven o'clock that Chester arrived. Helen, expecting his coming, had not gone to church, and just as the bells ceased his knock sounded.

Helen was just a little nervous at the thought of playing hostess to such an important person as a man with thirty thousand a year; but she soon found she need have no fear, for five minutes after his entrance he was sitting by the fire, smoking and talking as if he had known them all his life, and he drank the whisky, too, and praised its flavor, and sprung up to open the door for Helen when she was leaving the room to speak to the servant, and altogether made himself very agreeable.

He listened patiently while Wilfred talked, and looked over many of his pictures and his poems, praising the former and holding his peace about the latter, which was the kindest thing he could do.

He talked of matters theatrical with Helen, and music with her father, and listened attentively with real pleasure while the old gentleman played a little air of his own composing on his beloved violin.

Altogether, a very pleasant time was spent, although it was Sunday night.

When Chester took his leave, he did so, asking that he might come again, and went away determining to use his influence in fashionable theatrical circles to help Helen Avondale on in the world.

Of course he determined to help Wilfred, too; but he had, nevertheless, conceived a great contempt for that highly-gifted gentleman.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LOVE THAT LOVES ALWAYS.

THAT Sunday evening was not the last Richard Chester spent at the Avondales' lodgings.

It was strange what attraction he who was handsome, gifted and rich, welcomed in many a luxurious *salon* and well-furnished club, could find in those shabby rooms with people who were in no way very distinguished.

He never tried to analyze his real feelings. If he had been asked why he visited the Avondales, he would probably have replied that "they interested him."

Avondale was undoubtedly a clever artist, and it was a shame he should remain unknown, and the wife ought to be playing at a better theater than Boyd's museum.

Whatever was the real motive that prompted his visits, the Avondales found their position greatly improved by the aid of his friendship.

He bought one or two of Wilfred's pictures—especially those in whose painting Helen had had a share—at extravagant prices, and by recommending Avondale to his friends procured him several orders.

He obtained the manuscripts of some few of Mr. Rossmore's musical compositions and had them published, handing the old gentleman a good round sum in return for them, and altogether proved himself a regular good Samaritan to the family.

One evening, just as Helen was setting out to business, his well-known knock came at the door.

Wilfred was up-stairs in his painting-room, and Mr. Rossmore was out.

He was always anxious to help his daughter, and she, to please him, would give him little commissions which he would execute under the impression that his aid was most essential, guided on his walks by a little boy who had been hired for that purpose.

Thus when Chester entered the parlor, Helen Rossmore was there alone.

She advanced and greeted him warmly. She had a sincere regard for him, looking on him only in the light of her husband's friend, and was very grateful to him, not only for what he had done for them, but also for the way in which he did it.

Some months had now passed since he had made their acquaintance; Christmas had come and gone, and the late November fogs had given place to the chill winds of February.

"Good-evening, Miss Rossmore," he said pleasantly, calling her by the name by which she was generally known. "It's very cold, isn't it? How warm and bright your fire looks!" And he crossed over to the hearth-rug and stood still with the air of a man who is thoroughly at home.

"Wilfred is up-stairs," Helen said; "he is writing, I think, as of course he cannot paint after dark. Will you go up to him, Mr. Chester, or shall I call him down?"

"Neither," he returned, "if you will spare me a few moments."

"Certainly," she said, glancing at the clock. "What is it you want to say to me?"

They stood together on the hearth-rug, he leaning in a graceful attitude peculiar to him against the corner of the mantle-piece; she standing in front of him, looking up expectantly with frank, honest eyes into his face, one

foot resting on the bar of the fender, and her cloak (which had been recovered) thrown back from her shoulders, its white lining making a good background to the magnificent outline of her form clad in a tightly-fitting black dress.

She stood ready to listen, but he did not speak. He remained looking down into the hazel depths of her eyes, while a fierce bright fire burnt in his blue ones.

Her eyes dropped before his glance, and to her great vexation she found herself coloring hotly. She began to feel angry and slightly uncomfortable.

What right had he, her husband's friend, to look at her like that? What was he going to say?

Whatever it was that had been on his lips, he checked the words before they were uttered.

The fire died out of his glance, and after a pause he said:

"When does your engagement at the museum terminate, Miss Rossmore?"

She gave a sigh of relief.

After all, then, it was merely a commonplace subject he was going to converse upon.

"Next week," she said; "at the end of the pantomime season."

"May I ask if you have made other arrangements?"

"I have an engagement for a tour at Easter. Nothing till then; but, fortunately, Easter falls early this year."

"Unfortunately, rather," he said, with a smile; "for I have come to offer you an engagement at the—Square," mentioning the name of a well-known up-town theater.

"Oh, Mr. Chester, how kind of you!"

"Not at all," he returned. "Horace Belmore, the manager, you know, happened to mention to me that he required a clever, handsome lady to play the second part in his new comedietta and a heavy part in his drama, and I instantly thought of you. The engagement would be for the run of the piece—six weeks certain, and the salary one hundred a week. Can you not manage to accept it?"

The offer seemed to take Helen's breath away. The sum named seemed to be enough to transform her into a perfect Croesus.

"Yes," she said. "I have no doubt Mr. Lascelles will release me from my traveling engagement. How delighted Wilfred will be!"

Her first thought was, of course, of him, and her listener winced a little.

"Then you accept it?" he said.

"I think I may say yes. Of course, I must write to Mr. Lascelles and get his answer; but he is an old friend of mine, and I am sure he would not stand in the way of such a brilliant opening as this. Will you come up-stairs with me? I must tell Wilfred the good news before

I go. He perhaps will be able to thank you; I cannot."

"The knowledge that I have been able to render you ever so small a service is reward enough to cancel a much larger debt," he said, as he followed her up-stairs.

Soon afterward she went to business, and he did not remain long with Wilfred, but shortly took his leave.

A revelation had come to him that night; his inmost heart seemed to be opened like a sudden'y unclasped book, and he plainly read the real motives that had actuated him.

He loved Helen Rossmore, Wilfred Avondale's wife.

It was a terrible discovery to make, for he was not a man to love lightly, nor did he fail to appreciate the wrong he was committing.

He had not been by any means what is generally called a "good" man.

In his younger days he had lived a fast life, and even now was by no means a model "steady fellow."

But with all his faults he was made of the right stuff, and would have died sooner than broken his word or committed a mean or dishonorable action.

And yet the love of his life had come in the form of a pure, noble-minded woman, one that could never be his.

The admiration he felt for her at first sight had changed to a kind of pity, and this in turn had changed to love—such love as only a few are capable of.

As he walked up the avenue, an organ, playing before one of the houses, struck his ear.

The tune was "Sweethearts," and the refrain rose in his mind as he heard—

"Love for a week, a month, a day,
But alas! for the love that loves always."

He had loved before (or rather, had fancied he had, which is much the same thing), but those had been but fleeting passions, barely lasting a "week, a month, a day," as the case might be, and now he knew the "love that loves always" had come to him, and she was another's.

And she loved her husband so devotedly, weak-minded and contemptible as he was, that Chester felt that she had nothing but friendship to give him.

A fierce pang of jealousy had seized him when she had spoken of telling Wilfred the good news; and yet, with that strange contradiction that is one of the greatest traits of human weakness, he would not have loved or honored her one half so much had she been less faithful to her marriage vow.

As he walked homeward that evening beneath the starlight, he fought a battle with himself and conquered.

He could not bring himself to never see her

again as he once thought of doing, but he would be her constant friend through life, helping her—yes, and her husband too—by means that lay in his power.

Never by word or look should she guess his love. It was a love, he knew, which would never die, and he did not try to kill it. He simply knew that the one great pure love of his manhood had come to him, and resolved that, as they were separated by the greatest and most sacred of all barriers, that love should never be told.

Richard Chester was a brave man, and a man of no common strength of will.

He had had a hard struggle with himself; but now his mind was made up. There was little fear that he would change his resolve.

As he entered his house a light footstep sounded on the stairs, and the next instant his cousin, Constance Clare, ran down, and was by his side helping him to take off his fur overcoat.

She was a very pretty girl, with delicate, high-bred, and wonderfully expressive features, a rich pink and white complexion, with scarlet lips and pearly teeth. She resembled her cousin somewhat, the likeness lying chiefly in the beautiful blue eyes and raven hair.

"How tired and worn you look to-night, Richard, dear!" she said, in her clear, cultivated tones, that had just a suspicion of the Irish "brogue" to add to their piquancy. "So I won't bother you to-night."

"You wouldn't bother me, Connie," he rejoined, "not if you tried with all your might. I've only a headache, and am rather tired. I'll go to the snuggery and rest for an hour or two, and then I shall be quite well. Are you and the mater going out to night?"

"Yes, to Mrs. Ingram's. Are you coming?"

"I will come later on. But what's the matter with you? Mr. Jocelyn has not been flirting with another young lady, has he?"

They were standing under the gas-light now, and the last question, spoken in a mock melodramatic style, having reference to a certain young "swell" with weak eyes, who was supposed to cherish a passion for Constance, was called forth by a certain shade of uneasiness which he had detected on the girl's face.

"It's nothing," she said; but her tone belied her words. "We needn't talk just now; you look so weary, Richard."

He opened the door of his "snuggery," and gently drew her in.

"Tell me now," he said, gently. "I like to know of everything concerning my cousin—my sister, I might call her."

But Constance was silent, and sat on the couch tracing invisible designs with the toe of her satin slipper,

"Come, Connie!" Chester urged; "what is the matter? Why, my dear, what can have happened to seal your lips? You usually have no lack of words."

She looked up then, and spoke abruptly, and without forethought.

"Richard, do you care for me?"

"My dear cousin, what a question! What have I done that you should doubt me?"

"You do love me, then?"

"Of course I do!"

"Yes; but I mean very much?"

Chester looked at her as if he entertained some doubts of her sanity, and then answered, "Very much indeed!"

"Well enough to marry me?"

He looked at her in undisguised surprise.

"Good gracious, Connie! what has put such an idea into your head?"

"Your mother—Aunt Dorothy," she said, hiding her face in her handkerchief, as much to hide her blushes as to dry her tears. "She told me to-day she had set her heart on the match, and asked me if I cared for you. Ah, Richard, pray don't ask me to marry you—don't, don't!"

He looked down at her, smiling.

"But supposing I say I shall, Connie? Am I such a terrible ogre that—"

She had seen the smile, and interrupted him by a merry laugh.

"Of course you are an ogre!" she said; "but you don't love me in that way, do you, dear?"

"Why, Connie, no; I've always looked upon you as my sister! But why all this sudden fear of being asked to marry me? Is there some one else in the case?"

She did not reply, but the color brightened in her cheeks.

"So, then, you are not quite so fancy-free as I thought. Who is the happy fellow?"

"There is nobody," she stammered; "at least, he has not spoken yet, but—"

"I don't want your confidence, dear; but when he does propose, send him to me, and I think you know I would sacrifice anything for your happiness. There is my mother calling you. Go to her, dear, and have no fear that I shall—what's the correct way of putting it?—seek to force to the altar an unwilling bride."

She laughed gayly as she left him, turning back at the door to say:

"That last sentence is splendid! Have you been rehearsing melodrama lately?"

"Many a shaft, at random sent,
Finds mark the archer little meant,"

says Sir Walter Scott; and Constance, as she ran lightly away, happy as only such elastic natures as hers can be, little thought how her words had struck home.

Chester remained standing for some time in the same position as when she left him.

"That is the type of girl," he thought, "my mother would like me to marry! What would she have said had Helen been free, and had consented to become my wife—a poor, unknown actress; and yet"—a softer light lit up his face—"a woman whom a king might be proud to marry? Ah, well, my dream is hopeless! Nay, more, it is wrong, and I must wake to stern reality."

CHAPTER V.

THE TURN OF FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

THREE months have passed away since the close of the last chapter, and February's cold had changed to May's milder, if not more healthy atmosphere—May, that month with the most beautiful name among the twelve; the month of which poets sing; the month when spring flowers are in their zenith and summer blossoms bud, and yet the month when the weather is generally the most changeable, wet, and not unfrequently even cold.

Helen had entered on her engagement at the — Square Theater, and had met with a good deal of success, artistically speaking, while from a monetary point of view, her salary was to her a perfect El Dorado.

Thanks also to Richard Chester, Wilfred's prospects had greatly improved.

From being a poor, absolutely unknown man, he had suddenly developed (more by the aid of Chester's judicious patronage than by his own skill at the brush) into a fashionable "Society" artist.

How it exactly happened, neither he nor his wife ever quite knew, but orders suddenly began to flow in, and from wealthy and influential people, too; and as the payments were large, Wilfred soon found that his household could be conducted on a very different scale from hitherto.

The shabby rooms in the by-street leading off King's Road were vacated for much larger and handsomer ones near Madison Square, and Wilfred himself appeared to be an utterly changed man.

He hired a studio at some distance from his home, where he hung the walls with crimson draperies, among whose folds white statuettes and busts gleamed. The furniture was of crimson too, and the easel (a perfect study of machinery) was made so as to raise or lower or turn to the right or left the picture upon it by the mere touch of a lever. And before it, standing on a white fur rug, Wilfred would paint, clad in a violet velvet jacket and a violet and gold embroidered smoking-cap on his masses of bright curls.

A change, indeed, from the time when he

had been wont to paint in an untidy empty room, standing on bare boards, and wearing an old coat that was too shabby for any other purpose.

And Wilfred also had, by the aid of Chester, and partly by reason of his own beauty and grace of bearing, perhaps, gained an entrance into that magic circle called "Society," and seldom or never now spent his evenings by his fireside.

He had plenty of invitations. He was considered a genius—a little eccentric, perhaps—but then so very handsome, and graceful, and languid (his manners had undergone a change lately in his efforts to pose as a genius); and he had such a happy knack of composing charming verses on every conceivable subject that it was no wonder that people liked him.

Always weak, vain, cold-hearted, and selfish, this sudden accession to a certain kind of celebrity completely turned his head, and warped what little good there had ever been in his nature. He always passed himself off as a single man, never denying his marriage in so many words, but still leading people indirectly to presume him free.

In truth, he saw the low estimation in which actresses were held as a class by the people with whom he associated now, and he was ashamed to own as his wife the handsome and devoted woman who, to help him support his extravagance, was working while he lounged in some great lady's drawing-room, to compose sonnets, etc., at command.

His name appeared in society papers; his doings were often thought important enough for a whole paragraph to be devoted to them; and as he was in the habit of setting conventional customs pretty much at defiance—chiefly by lounging about a good part of the day, clad in a most out-of-the-way, if picturesque and becoming costume—he was voted clever and charming.

Of course, in the gossip that circulated about the club-room tables and the boudoir fires, his name was pretty often coupled with that of Helen Rossmore, but as she was an actress, people never dreamt of suspecting the association to be an honorable one.

Once, when Chester was entering his club, he suddenly overheard two men speaking lightly of Helen.

His fiery Celtic blood rushed to his brow, but his habitual self-restraint asserted itself, and he walked up to the table and said, calmly:

"You fellows don't know what you are talking about. Miss Rossmore is as pure and good as she is clever and beautiful. I can say no more."

"By Jove, Chester, are you smitten in that quarter?" asked one of the men.

"She is Wilfred Avondale's wife," was his

reply; "I have the honor to know them both well."

"Avondale's wife?" exclaimed some one else from the back of the room. "Why, he told me the other day he was single!"

"Did he that?" demanded Chester, sharply.

"Well, now you mention it, he did not say so in so many words, but he gave me to understand pretty plainly that he was unmarried."

"He can't have married the girl," said another man, looking up from his paper; "only the other day he was in here, and Bowton was talking about Miss Rossmore, telling a story of his sending her a letter, and how she returned it; how, when he waylaid her, she took him to task pretty plainly. Well, he was telling the story here, calling her 'a little fire-brand' and all manner of things, and Avondale sat there and never uttered a word. He must have interfered had he been her husband."

Angry words rose to Chester's lips as he listened; but for Helen's sake he checked them.

"Possibly he did not hear you," he said; but there was a slight ring of irony in his voice. "At any rate, I can assure you Helen Rossmore is his wife."

And he turned and left the room.

He strode down the street with a frown on his brow.

He had tried so hard to help the woman he loved, and for her sake Wilfred also, and instead he had only brought her sorrow.

When they had been comparatively poor and unknown, Helen had been happy, believing at least that Wilfred loved her; and he had done so in his selfish way, looking to her for everything; but now that he had been placed in a higher position, he forgot the woman who had clung to him and supported him in the days of poverty—was ashamed of her because of her profession, and often in his heart no doubt wished that he was free, confident that, in that case, he might marry some wealthy woman.

And Helen, quick to see and to suffer where her love was concerned, saw the change that had come over him, and suffered as only women who, like her, have wasted the whole of their unselfish love upon an unworthy object can suffer.

In some women this would have changed their love to hatred and contempt. But Helen's was not the love to change thus suddenly; it lived still.

But nothing can struggle long against coldness, neglect—ay, and sometimes insult; and slowly, but surely, her love began to diminish.

She was not conscious of it herself, nor did her husband dream of it; but it was gradually sinking like a dying thing, at times returning with something of its old strength, like the

flickering flame of an expiring candle, only to become colder still after each successive struggle.

This gradual decay was more fatal to all hopes of the love ever returning than any sudden transition to hatred would have been. A fortress may be overthrown by an earthquake, only to be rebuilt and to rise Phoenix-like from its ruins; but when time and cold winds have slowly worn out the stones, they will fall at last from sheer weakness, and crumble to powder as they fall. Another building may be raised on the same spot, but the first one has irrecoverably gone, the very stones of which it was built are decayed away, and nothing remains where once the fortress stood, a tower of strength, but the dust and ashes, the bitter memories, that cumber the ground.

Yes; Chester was bitterly disappointed and hurt. He had meant to make Helen entirely happy—to give her all her desires, and this was the result.

Her husband's love was estranged from her, and his extravagances, in spite of their enlarged income, had added to her many troubles.

Richard Chester felt desperate, fancying that he had brought these troubles on the woman he loved, and could have groaned aloud in his despair.

"What curse is upon me that I only bring sorrow to those I most love?" he cried.

Then his thoughts reverted to Wilfred, and his hot blood leaped in his veins.

"And this is the man," he muttered, "whom Helen has sworn to 'love, honor and obey,' to whom she is bound till death—a mean, egotistical fop who can deny her as his wife to the world, and can even sit calmly by and hear her lightly spoken of! I would horse-whip him if it were not that she once loved him, and perhaps loves him still!"

In the mean time Helen, as we have before said, had been terribly unhappy.

At first she had been contented. That her husband should join in pleasures in which she had no share, should enjoy himself while she worked, had seemed to her devoted mind only a right division of labor.

No Indian squaw ever toiled more for her "brave" than this all-sacrificing woman would have done, and did, for her husband; but when it came to her ears that he had denied their marriage, had even allowed her to be insulted in his presence, something very like contempt crept into her soul.

Time went on, and matters, instead of improving, only became worse.

She had hoped that when the novelty of his new position had worn off he would return to something like the old life, now happily bereft of its old pecuniary cares; but, so far from becoming more domesticated, his absences be-

came longer and more frequent, while his extravagance was such that in spite of the hundred dollars a week that had seemed such a fortune, and the money his pictures now realized (no inconsiderable sum), Helen found herself deeply in debt, and as shabby in dress as when she played at the Museum.

The constant dropping of water will wear away a stone, and although Helen Rossmore's love had been unusually strong, it at last began slowly and surely to decrease under her husband's perpetual slights, coldnesses, and indifference. Her patience and temper (which, whatever they had been to the outside world, had been all sweetness and gentleness to him), became soured; and one night, when he came to ask for more money, her spirit was fairly aroused.

"I have none to give you," she said, fixing her great dark eyes full on his shifty gray ones. "Listen to me, Wilfred. My patience is nearly exhausted. When we were poor, when your talents had not been recognized, did I not work to maintain you, and did I ever by word or look remind you you were eating woman's bread? But now all is changed. You are making a good deal of money, and, knowing that, many wives would have ceased to work at all. I did not; I am earning a good salary now, and we might be very happy if you would have it so. But no, you spend your own money in the society of people who regard me as your mistress, not your wife, and then come to me to take my earnings from me that you may return to them. I can give you nothing; we are in debt in all directions, and my father and I are more shabbily dressed than when we lived in the old place. Wilfred" (some of the old tenderness returned to her voice), "you must know how I have loved you; what a pleasure it has been for me to work for you; but, my dear, I cannot give you any more money now. We are so poor, that for your sake, as well as mine, I must keep what little I have to save exposure!"

"You tell me you have worked for me," he half-muttered. "What else were you fit for."

She caught the half-spoken words, and proud and angry as she had been just before, her love returned in a fitful, flickering flame, and she half turned away, more deeply hurt than one could imagine, but humbled for the moment.

"I know," she said, sadly. "I am not exactly your equal, Wilfred; I have not your genius, your poetic dreams, and of course my position as an actress prevents my going with you into society. But you should not allow people to speak ill of me," she added, thinking how often she had taken his part when irate landladies and impatient creditors had even hinted a word against him.

A sullen frown contracted his brows as he answered, very much in the tone of a sulky child who has been whipped.

"I can't very well own you as my wife, Helen, because, you see, dear, after all, you are an actress."

Her mood changed again, and she looked up, anger sparkling through the unshed tears that dimmed her eyes.

"Is that the only crime you can lay at my door?" she asked. "Have I not always been a good wife to you, Wilfred Avondale? Have I not done my best to make your home happy, and to sympathize with all your dreams and ambitions? Am I less of a lady in heart, ay, and if you will, in education too, than those whom you meet out? In what way am I their inferior? Answer me, if you can!"

He was perfectly frightened at her vehemence, overawed by the strength of her will, and, with a desire to temporize, stammered out the worst chosen words he could have found.

"I am sorry, Helen; I did not mean all I said; only you know it's aggravating sometimes to remember that if I were not married to you I might marry some heiress and be a rich man."

A curious expression passed over her face. Was it love or hate, scorn or pain, contempt or pity? It seemed to partake of all, and yet it would have been hard to say which was the strongest.

"And I stand in your way!" she said bitterly. "Well, at least you need not stay here long. I will not keep you away from your heiress's side. You may flirt with her if you cannot marry her; and as you allow me to pass as your mistress in your 'set,' the poor girl will be happy, thinking there is 'no just cause or impediment.'"

Wilfred did not like this change in his wife's manner toward him, and he had the grace to slink out of the room.

When she was alone, Helen remained for some time motionless, both hands clasped above her heart.

"I stand in his way," she murmured. "I am to him but a clog."

She put her hand up to her brow in a dazed way, moved across the room to a desk, which she opened, and drew forth a dagger.

"I have often used this on the stage," she thought. "Shall I use it in deadly earnest? Yes, it would be better so. My task seems finished, and I am but in Wilfred's way. There would be a nine days' talk, and then he would be free, and I should be forgotten, lying at peace under the sod."

A hand was laid upon her shoulder, and turning, she found herself confronting her father. She had not heard him enter, and he,

with his other senses quickened by his blindness, knew that something was wrong. His hand slid from her shoulder to her hand, and he felt the dagger there.

"Helen, what is this?" he exclaimed, as he sunk into a chair near.

She laughed a bitter little laugh.

"I was only rehearsing," she said. "I was thinking that my part in the tragedy of Life was over, and it was time to think about the great after-piece, Death."

"My child, my child, I cannot bear to hear you speak like that! It is unlike yourself, Helen. You are never flippant or cynical. What has happened? You must live yet for many years. What should I do, my love in my helpless blindness and old age without you?"

As he spoke, her mood changed again. The bitterness, the stony despair, the cynicism, the pride all fled alike, and bursting into a passion of tears, yielding to the agony of her grief, her unrequited love, her wounded heart, she sunk on the floor at his knees, and cried between her sobs:

"Yes, I will live for you, father, for I have none but you to love!"

CHAPTER VI.

WHAT CAN SHE MEAN?

WHILE the foregoing scene was being enacted at Helen's present home, another interview of anything but a pleasant nature was taking place at Chester's *bijou* mansion.

He had lunched with his mother and Constance, and was about to go to the little conservatory for a smoke, when his mother said:

"Are you busy this afternoon, Richard?"

"No; can I do anything for you?"

"Sit down and listen to me. I want to talk to you seriously."

He resumed his seat obediently, and waited.

"It is about Constance," Mrs. Chester began, rather nervously, seeing he did not speak. "Richard, she is my only brother's child, and has become as dear to me as a daughter—"

"And to me as a sister," he interrupted, with a slight emphasis on the last word.

Mrs. Chester sighed; she was an inveterate match-maker, but lacked the subtleness, the cunning, and the tact which is so essential.

In point of fact, her *modus operandi* was almost clumsy.

"I am getting old, Richard," she went on, trying a different course, "and, my boy, I should like to see you married to some good woman before I die!"

"I'm afraid that wish will not be granted, mother," he said, sadly. "I have met no woman who could be my wife whom I could love!"

"My dear Richard," said his mother, some-

what impatiently, "this is folly. You are getting toward middle age, and it is high time you should fling aside any romantic notions of love. Honor, respect, admire your wife by all means; but at your age it is nonsense to expect any Romeo-like passion will come to you!"

"You are right," he said, sadly; "at my age I have no right to love!"

"There you are wrong," exclaimed Mrs. Chester, warmly; "love if you can most certainly. What I meant to imply was, that if your heart was not greatly touched now, that fact in itself need not prevent your marrying, for, at your age, it is not likely that you would change."

"What is all this leading up to?" Chester demanded, somewhat shortly.

"Simply that I should like the one hope of my life fulfilled; I should like to see you married to Constance!"

"That wish can never be realized; so, my dear mother, pray dismiss it altogether from your mind. No doubt it would make a pretty romance. The beautiful heiress, brought up with her cousin, etc., etc., and the third volume, of course, ending with old shoes, rice and orange blossoms; but, you see, we are not in a novel, but in real life, and Connie and I, I am sure, both equally object to play the roles of hero and heroine, and decline to fall in love with each other!"

"Richard, you disappoint me very much!"

"I am very sorry, mother," he said, resuming his grave, almost sad, voice; "but that is how the case stands. Besides, I fancy Connie is inclined to throw the handkerchief elsewhere."

"Constance, like all girls, has had several trifling flirtations," returned Mrs. Chester, "and may, perhaps, fancy herself seriously in love, but it is only a mild attack, and she will soon recover; then I am certain she will turn to you, whom she has known, yes, and loved, all her life!"

"I hope she will not, mother, for I have no love to give her!"

"Think of what I said before; you must esteem and respect her, and love will come in time!"

"Oh, mother, can you not see that this is childish? Even if Connie were heart-whole (which I do not believe)—nay, even if I were coxcomb enough to believe her in love with me, can you not see that I could not marry her?"

"This is romance!"

"No, it is not. If I were entirely free I should most likely marry as many other men do, without consulting their hearts at all; but as it is, I could not think of making one woman my wife while another was—"

He paused abruptly, and in some embarrassment.

"Richard," said his mother, solemnly. "I can fill in the blank you have left. It is a subject I have never mentioned to you before, but since you seem to think so seriously about it, I must do so now. I have heard of your infatuation for this actress, Helen Rossmore."

"Miss Rossmore is the wife of Wilfred Avondale. I was her husband's friend. I need say no more to vindicate myself, mother; and to those who know her well, Miss Rossmore is above suspicion."

"And an actress!"

Mrs. Chester managed to convey a great deal of meaning in those few words.

"And an actress," he repeated, calmly; "and a high-spirited, pure minded lady in the best sense of the word. Mother, I would like to see you her friend. I can say no more."

Mrs. Chester was silenced for the moment, if not convinced; then she said, "You say she is the wife of Avondale, the artist. How is it, then, that he denies her?"

"Because he is a mean-spirited villain!" said Chester, hotly. "He sees the world look lightly on his wife's profession, and has not sufficient courage to defend her!"

"Then there is no truth in these reports that couple your name with this person's, Miss Rossmore?"

"Certainly not. They are scandalous lies, concocted by cowardly, envious people, against a beautiful and clever woman, who has no one to take her part!"

"And yet you even hinted to me just now that you were not quite free. I have too much faith in your good sense and knowledge of the world, Richard, to fear that you would ever seriously entangle yourself."

"Oh, enough of this!" he said, abruptly. "It is not likely I shall ever marry; but if I do, my wife will not be one of whose antecedents I shall be ashamed. Remember that, mother; and forget this little romance, of which Constance is the heroine and I the hero. I have spoken strongly about Miss Rossmore, but I feel strongly; and I must beg your pardon, mother, if my language was not quite fit for a lady auditor."

And so saying he left the room.

Among the many commissions Chester had given Avondale, was one to paint a portrait of Constance Clare.

It had been agreed that she should give him a "sitting" on the afternoon of the day in question; so, after a short ride in the Park, she returned to change her habit, and prepare to accompany her aunt to the artist's studio.

"Help me to make myself look nice," she said to her maid; "you know I am going to sit for my portrait, and I am to wear pale blue, with cream lace at my throat and el-

bows, and a crimson rose in my hair. Ah! I told you that before, did I not? Well, hand me that new blue dress I've had made on purpose (what a lovely delicate color it is!), and do my hair in the most becoming style you can—in natural-looking, careless waves, as I wore it at Mrs. Enfield's. I remember, Mr. Avondale admired it immensely!"

"Mr. Avondale is the gentleman who is to paint your portrait miss?" asked the maid, in a curious, subdued voice.

"Yes. He's a very clever man, they say; and I dare say he is, only I hav'n't seen many signs of it yet. He has a curious manner, you know—quite unlike those of most people. In fact, I'm quite sure, as I was saying to Grace Enfield the other day, if any other man behaved in such a way, he would be voted very ill-mannered. But then he's a genius, and, of course, it would not do for a genius to be polite and conventional in either dress or manners, or else people would not know he was a genius at all!"

"How is Mr. Avondale extraordinary?" asked the maid.

The woman seemed to have conceived a sudden interest for the fashionable artist; but Constance, who was never distant or cold to any one, and treated her servants with a freedom and kindness that almost bordered on familiarity, replied frankly, "Well, to begin with, you have to talk to amuse him, instead of his making conversation for you; and he will lie back in his easy-chair, pull his mustache, and look at vacancy with a dreamy expression in his light gray eyes, and then all of a sudden he will pay you a compliment, not delicately wrapped up as most men would, but will say, in so many words, 'Miss Clare, your eyes are like a turquoise stone!' or else, 'Miss Clare, would you allow me to write a sonnet on your raven hair?' You see he talks like a novel. Sometimes I have found him in a talking mood, and then he has held forth by the hour in a most high flown and poetic style. People say it's wonderfully clever, and I suppose it is, and it's my stupidity not to understand it, but to me it seems stilted gibberish. Moreover, his dress is most peculiar. Fancy any other man walking in the Park in the morning, dressed in a violet-velvet jacket, smoking cap, and patent leathers! Even when he is supposed to be in evening dress he wears an open Byronic collar. These peculiarities of his are called 'marks of genius;' in anybody else they would be thought proofs of lunacy. However, he's a fashionable man now, and is going to paint my portrait and send it to the Academy."

"Is he a handsome man, my lady?" asked the maid.

"No, not to my taste, although I know

many girls who rave about his beauty. He is rather tall, very slender, and certainly graceful, with long, white, nerveless-looking hands and a general look of weakness. He has good features, but, I suppose, about as incapable of fire or warmth as a piece of carved stone, and large expressionless blue eyes. I suppose he really is clever, though, for he can paint well. He has yellow hair, too, and wears it in little curls, and parted in the middle, with a few falling over his forehead in a way that reminds one of a lady's fringe. Altogether, if I were asked to describe him, I should say he was very ladylike in appearance."

"Miss Clare is severe," said the maid, slowly.

She was a rather strange woman, who went by the name of Martha Redfern.

She was about thirty, but although ten or twelve years before she had possessed considerable beauty, it had been of that type that soon fades, and now she was only a *passe* washed-out looking little woman, with a spare, angular form, light-brown hair of no particular shade, a sallow complexion, keen gray eyes, and thin, colorless, compressed lips.

It certainly was not the face of a woman to be either loved or admired, nor yet exactly feared.

Her tongue was sharp and shrewish; her temper sour, and wee betide all who were helpless and in her power; but to her superiors she was almost cringing, and to her equals generally polite.

The ruling passion of her life was love of money; and for love, hatred, revenge, or any other great passion, her narrow nature had no room.

Constance answered Martha's last words by a merry laugh.

"You see, I always make up my mind about people at first sight," she said; "and I cannot say that I like Wilfred Avondale."

"Wilfred Avondale? Then his name is Wilfred?"

"Yes. Did you think it was anything else?"

"No, my lady; at least, that is, I have often heard him spoken of, and I had forgotten his Christian name. Is it true that he is married, miss?"

Constance turned a look of undisguised amazement on her maid.

The scandals that had been current had not reached her ears.

"Not that I am aware," she said; "I have never heard of his wife."

"Will your hair suit now, Miss?" asked Martha, as if to change the subject.

"Yes, beautifully, I thank you, Redfern. Now, then, on with my dress. Thanks. Now my gold bracelets and necklet, and my rose. That's right. Now my hat and dolman."

"Would you allow me to go out this afternoon for a short time?"

"Certainly; only remember and be back in plenty of time to dress me for dinner. Thanks. I look splendid now, and there's the carriage at the door. Good-by."

Constance flitted away—a bright, laughing vision in pale blue and cream color, and Martha Redfern hurried to her own room to prepare to leave the house.

"At last!" she muttered, compressing tightly her thin lips in a way that meant no good for the subject of her thoughts. "I have found him after all these years! I have already got his address from Daneham, Mr. Chester's servant, and I will go there. Stay, though; how foolish I am; he will be out painting Miss Clare! I will go, however. I shall do some good if I see this actress—his so-called wife."

And she hastened into the street.

CHAPTER VII.

A MAN'S DISHONOR.

HELEN sat alone in her sitting-room at needlework. Wilfred was out, probably at the studio, but she knew not where for certain; and her father, under the escort of his little guide, had gone for his usual afternoon walk "round the squares."

Since her husband's accession to comparative wealth, and his entrance into "Society," she had gradually altered, and not for the better.

She was still a fine, tall, handsome woman; but a slight frown (more of pain than of anger) habitually contracted her broad, high brow, and the great brown eyes looked full of a dull pain whenever she was in repose. In truth, her mad, blind love for Wilfred would not die without a bitter struggle. It had been so strong, so thoroughly a part of herself, of her life, that not even all his cruel, selfish coldness, neglect and insult could quite kill it.

She was thinking deeply on that quiet afternoon—thinking of her love, of its reward; and in spite of her own better, clearer judgment, was trying to make excuses for her husband even to herself.

Presently she noticed a woman coming down the street, dressed in a neat black gown and jacket.

Her costume was decidedly unbecoming, and seemed to be made for the purpose of throwing into yet more strong relief her sharp, thin features and angular figure. She was that type of woman who, if dressed in one of Worth's masterpieces, would always look "old-fashioned," and in her plain black gown gave one the impression that her age was doubtful—somewhere about thirty, most likely; but it

required an exercise of the imagination to believe that she could ever have been young or would ever grow old.

And yet ten years ago she had been a rustic beauty, with a brilliant complexion, slender waist, and good features. But now her cheeks had fallen in, and the features were painfully sharp. The tints of her complexion had faded to a dull drab; the almost golden light that had once played upon her sandy hair had gone, and her once pretty figure had become angular.

In a word, it was Constance Clare's maid, Martha Redfern.

Helen Rossmore let her eyes wander as carelessly over this person as she had done over the others who had passed along the street.

No subtle instinct, no warning presentiment, came to her.

Martha came along slowly, looking up carefully at every house, and reading its number, as if uncertain in which one her business lay.

She paused before No. 11, right under the window where Helen sat at work; stood still for a moment, as if to regain her breath or to collect her faculties; and then boldly ascending the steps, rung the bell violently with the air of one who has a trying interview before her, and is determined to go through her business at any cost.

Helen, who was at all times somewhat nervous, and had lately become morbidly so, started violently as the sound of the bell struck her ear and dispersed her dreams.

"A lady, ma'am, to see you," announced the servant, opening the door.

"Has she sent in no name?" asked Helen.

"No, ma'am; she only asked to see Miss Rossmore."

"Some one from the theater," thought Helen, as she told the girl to show the visitor in.

Martha Redfern entered, the servant retired, and then the two women stood facing each other, the width of the dining-table between them.

A sudden presentiment of coming evil seized Helen, and she felt that this Puritanical-looking little woman in black was no friend of hers.

"You wanted to see me, I think?" she said. "I am Helen Rossmore."

"Are you?" returned the woman, shortly, and yet with a certain air of embarrassment in her manner, as if she wished to say something, and had not the words at her command. "Yes, I certainly wanted to speak to you. I don't think I've ever seen you before."

"Not at the theater?" questioned Helen, pleasantly, by way of something to say.

"Most certainly not there. I don't go to theaters," said Martha, sharply, in a tone that implied, "I should be sorry to go, too."

Helen bit her lip and was silent, waiting to hear more.

"Well, I don't know that I did want to speak to you, after all," said her visitor, presently, as if relenting. "I think I'd rather see Mr. Avondale first."

"My husband is out at present. Will you call again? I cannot quite tell how long he may be out."

"Your husband? Oh, so you call him that, do you?"

Helen rose to her feet, a magnificent, majestic woman, with angry indignation in her beautiful eyes and quivering lip.

"If you want to insult me," she said, restraining her passion by a strong effort, "you might, I think, choose a better time and place than when you are under my roof—are my guest."

"I suppose that is acting," said Martha, with an assumption of virtuous contempt. "I don't want any high-flown airs here, or any mixing matters. You are not Wilfred Avondale's wife."

Helen turned away with a gesture that spoke more than a volume of words, and laid her hand upon the bell.

Martha continued, ere she could pull it, in the same quiet, cutting tones:

"If you were his wife he would not deny you, as he does to his friends."

Helen's hand dropped from the bell to her side as if she had been stung; then, as she heard him blamed, her love for Wilfred seemed to return with all its full force, and she faced her antagonist, strong for his defense.

"My husband has his own motives for acting as he does. At any rate, such matters lie between myself and him alone, and if I am content, I do not see that you have any right to interfere."

"Oh, I can guess his reason for acting as he does!" returned Martha, with something like an attempt at mimicry. "He is afraid his carryings-on with you will come to his wife's ears."

"His wife's ears! What do you mean?"

"Only this—I am Wilfred Avondale's lawful wedded wife!"

"You?"

"Yes; I."

Helen reeled backward a few paces, her limbs trembled, her brain seemed on fire; then, by a mighty exercise of her indomitable will, she partially recovered herself, and although obliged for a moment to sink into a chair, she managed to ask, calmly:

"Will you explain a little further, if you please? I think you must be laboring under some strange mistake."

"I don't think you'll find that I am," returned Martha, compressing her thin lips

more and more, and taking a chair uninvited.

"Pray, how long have you known Wilfred Avondale?"

"We have been married three years," said Helen, "and I knew him nearly two years before then."

"Indeed! Well, to tell my story properly, I must begin at the beginning, and go about it in my own way."

Martha spoke slowly and deliberately, as if she wished to prolong the torture of suspicion for Helen; but the latter sat very still and quiet, making no sign of the agony she was suffering, excepting a nervous clasping and unclasping of her fingers.

Martha settled herself comfortably in her chair, arranged the buttons of her jacket, cleared her throat and coughed, and then at last began:

"Twelve years ago I was a foolish girl, very pretty and very willful, living on my father's farm, and helping mother with the work."

"My parents were good people, who did their best to train up their children in the way they should go."

"One summer, a very young gentleman—he was about eighteen or nineteen—came sketching into our part of the country, and he put up at my father's farm."

"I need not describe him, for it was Wilfred Avondale. I had a pretty face in those days, and thought a great deal of such vanity."

"Ah, well, I had my reward!"

"Avondale wished to paint my portrait. My father, after a time, consented; and during the sittings I gave him, I thought I had never seen so charming a man."

"He dazzled me with his beauty and his learning; besides, he used to compare us to some people in a poem. I forget the title of it after these years, but I know it said, 'He was but a landscape painter, and a village maiden she;' and that they married, and he turned out to be a rich lord; and I, like the foolish girl I was, thought Wilfred Avondale, the handsome artist, must be very like the landscape painter he had read to me about, and that if I, the village girl, married him, no doubt he, too, would prove a millionaire in disguise."

"He told me he loved me, and asked my father's consent to our union, but it was sternly refused."

"My father acted wisely; he could see Wilfred Avondale's character in its true light, and he knew he would make no fit husband for me."

"I was mad, I think. My vanity, my pride, alike urged me to disobey my father; and, after a short time, I consented to Wilfred's plan, and promised to elope with him."

"I accompanied him to New York, and we were married at a church in the suburbs."

"Where?" demanded Helen, raising her head for the first time. "I cannot believe this story of yours unless you produce proofs. At what church were you married, on what date, and where is the copy of your marriage certificate?"

Martha looked at her rival with some little curiosity.

Hitherto she had never dreamed that Avondale had ever been mad enough to go through a ceremony of marriage with Helen Rossmore, but now her words seemed to imply that such was the case.

She rose, and, taking a paper from her pocket, flung it on Helen's knee with all the cruel petty spite of a low narrow nature when it knows it has the power to wound, to humble one infinitely its superior.

"There is the certificate!" she said coldly. "I suppose you can read, so you'll see the date and name of the church there. The story of my married life is soon told. After about six months of wretched poverty we parted by mutual consent, he going his way and I mine. I went into service, and rose to the position I now hold. Even then I thought it must surely be some coincidence, as I did not think he had energy enough ever to make a name, but to day my vague suspicions have been confirmed, and I am here!"

Helen Rossmore sat during this last speech with her eyes bent on the paper she held.

It was a certificate of the marriage of Wilfred Avondale and Martha Redfern at the Church of St. Mary, Harlem, on the 14th September, some twelve years before.

Helen rose as Martha concluded, and, with a strange, unnatural, stony calm, handed her back the certificate.

"I cannot believe this!" she said. "There is some terrible mistake! Wilfred loved me too much to wrong me thus!"

"It's me, I think, who's the wronged one," snapped Martha, "for he married me! And you can be no good, or you wouldn't be an actress; and besides, he denies you wherever he goes!"

The hot, fierce blood of passion came surging up in Helen's heart, and broke down her unnatural calm as the boiling lava of a volcano forces away its barriers of ice and snow.

The insult to herself was forgotten in the slight it reflected on him, and in that moment her love for him returned with all its old force.

"You shall not speak in that manner before me!" she exclaimed. "I have sworn to be true to him, and I will keep my oath. This is some base calumny, prompted by some motive of which I am ignorant! I suppose you

want money. You will be disappointed in that case. Now, leave me!"

Martha stood unmoved.

"You forget," she said, coldly, "the certificate!"

And she pointed to where the paper still lay on the table.

But Helen was maddened by grief and horror, and would not be convinced by arguments or proofs.

"It is a forgery!" she exclaimed. "Nothing will make me think ill of him."

Almost as she spoke, the door opened, and Wilfred Avondale and Richard Chester appeared on the threshold.

"Great Heaven! Martha!"

The cry broke from Avondale, and, true to his cowardly instincts, he tried to retreat; but Chester was between him and the door, and he was forced to brave the storm as best he could.

Helen sprung to his side and seized his arm.

"Wilfred," she cried, in accents that trembled with agony, "this woman says she is your wife."

"Yes," said Martha, with a slight, self-confident smile, "and he knows I speak the truth."

With a despairing clasp she clung to his arm, raising her beautiful, unhappy eyes to his face, with a look in their hazel depths that went to Chester's heart, laden as it was with the love he felt honor forbade him to tell.

Seeing the strictly private nature of the scene before him, Chester's first instinct had been to withdraw; but his love for Helen ruled all other feelings, and he determined to stay, so that in an emergency he might be of use to her.

"Oh, Wilfred!" cried Helen, in trembling, wailing accents; "Wilfred, speak—only speak! I don't believe this woman's tale; I don't, indeed, dear! How could I doubt you? But let me at least hear you say it is a lie!"

Martha laughed aloud—a cruel, mocking laugh of triumph—while Helen still clung to Avondale, and besought him more by her beautiful eyes and imploring gestures than by words to speak.

Chester at last could bear it no longer.

"Avondale," he exclaimed, "answer your wife, and turn this woman from the house!"

Wilfred's lips quivered like that of a child "found out" after being naughty.

"I cannot," he said, hiding his face, "for Martha speaks the truth."

Helen's clinging hands fell away from him, and she moved a pace or two backward from his side with such a look of wounded love and reproach in her beautiful eyes, that even his cold, selfish nature was touched.

"Helen," he said, stretching out his hands imploringly to her, "when I married you I had not heard of her for some years, and I thought she must be dead."

"Did you make no inquiries after her?" demanded Chester, angrily.

"No," said Wilfred, in a dazed, helpless way. "I thought she must be dead; at any rate, I hoped she was."

The last words irritated Martha beyond all measure.

Her nature, although incapable of love, could feel a certain sort of jealousy.

Her vanity was wounded, and although she did not believe in her heart he had ever been mad enough to marry Helen, she determined to seek a little revenge, worthy of her petty nature, by frightening him.

"You hoped I was!" she almost screamed. "Wilfred Avondale, you shall suffer for this! Do you know what you have done? You have committed bigamy, and I—I am the one who will prosecute you for it!"

Avondale's terror at her words was simply pitiable to witness.

"No, no, Martha!" he cried; "I thought you were dead. You would not expose me in the police-courts?"

She saw her advantage, and acted on it.

"I will," she said. "You have committed bigamy, and I shall prosecute you for it."

He poured forth a passionate appeal for mercy. He, who had just gained his long-wished-for goal—who had at last gained an entrance into the magic circle of Society—who had gained a certain amount of celebrity—for him to be disgraced like a vulgar thief would mean ruin.

In that moment, while he pleaded thus, the difference of those two women's natures showed itself.

Martha, with her cruel sneer, remained threatening him with a vengeance which, in her heart, she never meant to fulfill; while Helen's love, even in the moment of its death, asserted itself, and prompted her to save him from social ruin, even though it were at the bitter cost of all her woman's nature held most dear.

"No," she said, "no; you cannot prosecute him for bigamy, for he never married me!"

The words fell like a thunderbolt in the midst of that silent room.

Even Wilfred was staggered at the power and self-sacrifice and courage of this woman's love; but Chester sprung to her side.

"Mrs. Avondale," he exclaimed, "I can guess the motive power that prompted you to say that; but think again, and, for your own sake, speak the truth."

But the lie rose readily to her lips now.

"I repeat," she said, "he never married me,"

The door burst open, and her blind old father entered.

"Helen," he cried, "what do I hear you say? Unsay those cruel words!"

For a moment her resolution wavered. Then she gained strength, and said:

"Father, you were ill, and could not leave the house at the time. You thought we were married. We—I have deceived you—we were not married."

An old man's heart-broken cry rose wailing on the trembling air.

"Shame, shame!" he cried. "Helen, you are my only child—I have been so fond, so proud of you, and yet you have disgraced and dishonored me, and in my old age I have to curse—*cur e* you!"

An exceedingly bitter moan burst from Helen's white lips. Her tortured spirit would bear no more, and she reeled, and would have fallen had not Chester caught her in his arms. And she lay there, cold, pale, and motionless, like one dead, the unbound masses of her brown hair falling over his shoulders.

CHAPTER VIII.

FOR HER DEAR SAKE.

WHEN Helen recovered, she found herself on the sofa in her own room, with the house servant bending over her.

Slowly remembrance returned, and then she turned her face to the wall and wept hot scalding tears at the thought of her grief, her loneliness, and her shame.

But she was not a woman to waste her time in fruitless lamentations, and in a short time the violence of her first paroxysm of grief passed away, and she became calmer.

She had to go to the theater that night, no matter how great her trouble.

She was the public's servant; the public had to be amused, so she was obliged to summon all her courage and strength of will to aid her to go through the ordeal.

Before she left the house she sought her father, who was sitting in silent despair in the front room.

Wilfred and his wife had already left the house, the former being manly enough to be thoroughly ashamed of himself, and not daring to meet the woman he had so much wronged.

Chester had remained until he heard from the servant that Helen had recovered from her faint, and then he, too, had gone, feeling that father and daughter would be better alone together.

Mr. Rossmore never looked up nor spoke as Helen entered, and encouraged by his silence she crossed the room to his side, and sunk upon her knees by his chair.

"Father!" she whispered, softly.

And then he raised his head, and answered

her, and in his trembling tones there was more of sorrow than of anger.

"Helen, have you spoken the truth to-day? Mr. Chester has been talking to me, and he is convinced you have deceived us. He has gone now to St. Clement's Church to look over the registers."

"Father, you have not let him do that? Why did you tell him the name of the church at which we were married?"

"Married! Then this story is not true?"

"No, father. I believed myself to be his lawful wife. But why mention this now? None must ever think so, for to let them know the true state of the case would be to put Wilfred in the power of the law."

"And does he not deserve it?" demanded Mr. Rossmore, wrathfully. "After deceiving you in the most scandalous manner, he hides his own guilt behind your unmerited shame!"

"Hush!" said Helen. "Let us forgive him, and strive to forget the past. I loved him once; and now I must make up my mind to begin life afresh. The past is dead forever, and will not bear remembering!"

Time passed on. Helen was still at the Square Theater, and nightly became a great favorite with the public, probably because of the gratuitous advertisements she obtained through gossips mingling her name scandalously with that of Wilfred Avondale.

A great change had come over the artist of late, for Mrs. Avondale (whom we have hitherto seen as the obsequious lady's-maid) suddenly developed an entirely new phase of character.

Unlike poor, patient, loving Helen, she insisted on accompanying her husband wherever he went; and besides that, she kept the purse, and allowed him very little to spend.

A romantic story was current of a long lost wife suddenly restored to her mourning husband, and Society opened its arms to her, and received her partly because her husband was a popular artist, and partly because there was supposed to be a romance attached to her; and then, too, in spite of that romance, she really was so very plain, that ladies could afford to be enthusiastic about her.

Constance Clare could have told Society that the woman they raved about had once been her maid; but Constance was very good-hearted and generous, and she kept the secret of Mrs. Avondale's antecedents.

Others, however, were not so kind, and some very curious rumors began to spread about Wilfred Avondale's wife; but the fact that Constance never hinted that she had ever been her maid made most people discredit the reports for a time, at any rate.

But for the present, Mrs. Avondale, who

had sense enough to dress very quietly, and not to talk too much, passed muster very well, and managed to work her way into a very good "set."

But Wilfred all this time had been extremely unhappy.

He had formerly wished himself free from Helen, that he could form an alliance with some richer and more fashionable woman; but, although that wish had certainly been granted so far as Helen was concerned, he had only found himself, to use a homely simile, out of the frying-pan into the fire.

Nothing was open for him now but to make the best of matters, all thought of rebellion being out of the question, for Mrs. Avondale proved herself the master, and ruled her husband with a rod of iron.

Helen, meanwhile, had, with her father, removed to cheaper and more comfortable rooms; and now that there was no Wilfred to draw upon her purse, she was better off than she had been for some time before.

But the past still hung like a shadow over her life, and she keenly felt the slight of no longer being permitted to take her place among honest women.

The thought that she had never been a wife was constantly with her, and made the cruel rumors that were rife all the harder to bear.

Another trouble was her father's health, which her loving eye could see was fast declining.

Chester still visited her.

In all her troubles he had been beside her, her right hand and her firm friend, and never by word or look did he tell of his great, unselfish love.

He had gone to St. Clement's Church and seen her marriage certificate, but (as he once told her) it was only to satisfy her father that he went; he himself could never doubt the fact.

Helen all this time had never given way to her grief.

She led a quiet life, doing her duty simply and well, and in spite of the cruel past and the anxieties of the present, she would not be thoroughly wretched while she had the satisfaction of duties well done.

We have said rumors were very common concerning her affairs, and, of course, these came to Chester's ears, greatly to his annoyance.

One day he strode into his club with a society paper in his hand.

It was open at a page of passing notes entitled "In and Out the Crowd," written by his friend Cecil Vaughan.

Vaughan was sitting at one of the tables, and to him Chester went.

"Did you write this?" he asked abruptly.

Cecil glanced at the paragraph at which he pointed, and read:—

"Mr. and Mrs. Avondale were, I hear, at Mrs. Ingram's ball last week. What an attached couple these seem! I wonder what a certain actress, who nightly appears at a theater not far from Broadway, has to say to their domestic arrangements?"

Vaughan looked up lazily.

"Yes," he said, "I wrote that. Rather personal, I own; but then it goes down with the public, and Avondale, I know, doesn't mind it; he likes notoriety, no matter what sort."

"Do you know that is a cruel and scandalous libel?" demanded Chester.

"My dear fellow, don't get excited. A libel on whom? Every one knows it is the truth. The story is the common talk of the town."

"It is a heartless libel," repeated Chester, on Miss Rossmore."

"The cap fits," laughed Vaughan, with his invincible good-temper. "My dear Chester, don't make a fool of yourself over this woman. She's very handsome and all that, I grant; but all the same, she's not worth raving about."

"No woman shall be unjustly insulted in my presence, Vaughan—especially Miss Rossmore."

"Well, if the case is so bad as that," said Vaughan, still provokingly cool, "take my advice, and don't champion her. The chances are you will do her more harm than good; for although I may believe that you are acting quixotically, others won't; and there are quite enough ugly stories afloat about her and Avondale already."

Chester with difficulty controlled his rage.

"That is enough," he said, sharply; "if you cannot speak with common respect and politeness of a lady, you are unfit for the society of men. Good-night."

He turned away, when Vaughan who had spoken as he had done out of a thoughtless, boyish mischief, sprung to his feet and followed him.

"Chester," he said, "don't get so angry—I meant no harm."

"Possibly not," returned Chester coldly; "but evil is wrought by want of thought as well as by want of heart."

And shaking off Cecil's detaining hand, he left the room.

After that, of course, Vaughan could go no more to the dainty little mansion near the Park, and somehow or other Constance Clare became suddenly very subdued and low-spirited.

These rumors troubled Richard Chester greatly; his love, though untold, was so strong that every word spoken against Helen Rossmore was a dagger plunged in his heart.

And yet what could he do?

His own sense and his knowledge of the world told him that by his championship of her he only strengthened those scandals at which Cecil Vaughan had hinted.

After a good deal of anxious thought, he determined to try a forlorn hope, for he knew that all would be well if a lady of position would call upon Helen and in other little ways treat her as an equal.

Therefore he decided to ask his mother to be kind to his poor lonely actress who had won his love; still, when he remembered his mother's family pride, and the care she always had taken to hold firm her position in society, how could he dare hope that she would visit an actress?

Would she not think such an acquaintance "compromising," or, at least, *outré*?

He knew by heart all the society jargon she might use; nevertheless, he resolved to broach the subject to her on the earliest opportunity.

"Nothing venture, nothing have," he thought.

He found the opportunity he sought that very evening.

He had dined at home with his mother, Constance, a dowager, and her daughter.

After dinner he had, of course, as the only gentleman of the party, been left alone in solitary state to enjoy his wine, when his mother returned in search of a rather valuable trinket she had missed from the bunch of "charms" at her watch-chain.

He stooped, and after a little trouble found and restored her the jewel.

She took it with a smile and an injunction not to be long before he joined them in the drawing-room, and then prepared to leave him.

"One moment, mother, if you please," he said. "I want to ask you if you will do me a favor?"

"You know I would do anything in my power for you, Richard!" returned the stately old lady, as she bent over his chair and kissed his broad, upturned brow.

He took both her hands in his, and looked anxiously in her face.

"Will you promise to grant me this favor?" he asked, in a tone which left her in considerable doubt whether he was in jest or earnest.

Her kindly face, framed in its silver hair, softened as she looked down at him.

"I may safely promise you," she said. "I know my son would not ask of me anything I could not do."

"I will extort no promise, then," he replied; "for our ideas of what you might or might not do, mother, may differ slightly. I ask you to call upon a friend of mine—on a lady."

Mrs. Chester looked surprised, and regarded her son steadily for some moments.

"A lady," she repeated, slowly, "and a friend of yours, Richard! Who and what is she?"

"Helen Rossmore, the actress—Wilfred Avondale's wife," he said, boldly.

Mrs. Chester uttered a little cry.

Never in all her life had she been more utterly astounded, and even her aristocratic code of laws that ruled emotion of any kind to be "bad form," did not prevent her showing how surprised she was.

"Richard," she said, after a little pause, during which he had remained seated, looking up anxiously into her face as she stood before him on the leopard skin hearth-rug, "are you really serious when you ask me to call upon this Miss Rossmore?"

"Certainly. I was never more serious in my life," Chester answered gravely.

"Then all I can say is that you must be mad. Had any one else asked this of me, I should have said it was an insult. As it is, I know you too well ever to think of such a thing; but, looking at it in the most charitable light, I must tell you that I am anything but pleased at your want of consideration for my feelings. Had you been a young boy, unacquainted with the ways of the world, I might possibly have forgiven you; but in a man of the world, a man of your age, such a request is almost inexcusable!"

"Mother, will you listen to me for one minute? Whatever scandals you may have heard of Helen Rossmore, this is the truth. She firmly believed herself to be Wilfred Avondale's wife. He behaved most shamefully toward her; but they went through the ceremony of marriage at a City church. I have seen the certificate. He has deserted her now, and cruel scandals have arisen; I tried to defend her, with the result that her name has been coupled with mine. Mother, it is to quiet these cruel and unjust rumors that I ask you to visit her. None can guess how much she has suffered, how loyal, how true, how noble she is! Mother, I implore you to know her! She is worthy to be your friend. I can say no more!"

For a moment while she listened the angry surprise died out of Mrs. Chester's face.

Her warlike heart was touched at this story so simply told (for Richard Chester was a man of few words at all times), but she could not wholly relent.

"My dear boy," she said, using the old familiar words by which she still often addressed him, in spite of his five-and-thirty years, "I am very sorry for Miss Rossmore, and if her story has been rightly told to you she is a much injured woman; but if she were a martyred saint you must know I could not visit her, for *she is an actress!*"

With a smothered exclamation, Chester turned away.

"I ought to have known better," he exclaimed. "Forgive me, mother, for ever being such a fool as to think you could for one

moment lay aside social distinction to do Helen Rossmore, a noble, loving, injured woman, a service."

Mrs. Chester, without a word, but with a gentle, yet grieved look in her eyes, left the room; while Richard returned to his chair and his not too pleasant train of thought.

A tap at the door aroused him, and it was followed by Constance asking if she might come in.

"Why, certainly," was Chester's answer; "what is it, Connie, dear?"

"I've come to know if you are coming up to us at all to-night. It's nearly ten o'clock, and here you've been sitting for almost two hours alone in your glory; we thought you must have gone out. Come up-stairs, Dick, darling, and have a cup of tea. I know you want one."

"Very well, dear, I'll come since you ask me; but I confess I hate facing those two Egremont women—the old cat with her scandal and spectacles, and the daughter with her kittenish manners; but I'll brave even them for a cup of your tea, dear, then I must go out. Ten o'clock, did you say? I'd no idea it could be so late."

"Richard," asked Constance, slowly, "will you see Cecil Vaughan to-night?"

"Why do you ask, Connie?"

"I mean, have you seen him lately?"

"No; that is, not to speak to. Why, my little cousin, what does all this mean?"

"I saw him in the Park yesterday," returned Constance, "and he told me to ask you something, and I said I would."

"Upon my word, you are very kind. Well, what did he tell you?"

"That he loved me!" blurted out Constance, thinking it best to go to the point at once.

Richard Chester's face grew very grave.

"And do you love him, Connie?"

"Yes, Dick, with all my heart."

"Then, my love, I'm very sorry to hear it, for he spoke the truth when he said I should not consent."

"Ah, Dick, and he was once your greatest friend!"

"I know that, my dear; but since then I have heard him speak as no man of honor would. No, Connie, I cannot consent to your marriage with him."

"Dick, and I love him so!"

"My dear little Connie, I do not think he is a man to whose keeping I dare trust you."

"Will nothing make you relent?"

"Yes. If Cecil Vaughan will once establish himself as a true gentleman and as a man of honor in my eyes I will be bogie no longer; I will even beg his pardon."

"My own dear Dick," exclaimed impulsive Connie, "I am sure Cecil will some day do that!"

CHAPTER IX.

DEAD SEA FRUIT.

HELEN ROSSMORE was in her dressing-room at the theater, putting, with the aid of her dresser, the finishing touches on her toilet.

She was to play *Georgina Vesey*, in Lord Lytton's comedy of "Money," and looked very well in her long black gauze dress, and any one seeing her then for the first time, as she stood there the very picture of Sir John's vain and frivolous daughter, would never have thought that she was a woman who had loved, and suffered, and been strong.

"Overture, please," said the call-boy in the passage without.

And Helen added a few jet ornaments to her costume, and then sat down to wait for the beginning of the piece, talking meanwhile to the Lady Franklin, who shared her dressing-room, and who was in great trouble through the illness of a relative.

"So many people are ill with the small-pox," said Lady Franklin, wiping a tear from her eye with one hand and applying the powder-puff with the other; "and it is such a horrid, loathsome complaint. Poor dear Louisa! I'm sure I shall never be able to get through to-night through thinking of her."

"You must make haste," said Helen, sympathetically. "The overture is nearly over."

"I know that; but I think I have plenty of time. I'm not a beginner."

"No; but you are on very soon. Fortescue and I are discovered."

"Beginners, please!" shouts the call-boy outside. "Miss Rossmore, please!"

Helen gathered up her skirts, and made her way onto the stage to take up her position with Mr. Fortescue (the Sir John), when the stage-manager clapped his hands and shouted "Clear!"

The curtain rose, and the play began.

Lady Franklin and the leading lady, Clara Douglas, were waiting in the "O. P." second entrance.

The former leaning against the flat, with her hand on the door, waiting for her cue.

"I'm so sorry to hear of your sister's illness," said Clara; "have you heard of her to-day?"

"Yes; she is no better."

"I am very sorry. How many people are ill with the small-pox, just now! I hear that the wife of Wilfred Avondale, the artist, has it!"

"Indeed! that will interest Helen Rossmore, I suppose?"

"Yes; but I don't like to tell her. Do you know the rights of that story?"

"No; I don't. I've heard so many tales, that one never knows what to believe. That's for us,"—and in the two ladies went.

But although the foregoing conversation had been carried on in whispers, Helen, from her seat in the center of the stage, had heard a stray word or two of it, and it required all her self-control to restrain herself just then.

She managed to get through the scene, however, and, fainting and agitated, gained the wing.

"Why, my dear, what is the matter?" asked Fortescue, who was waiting there to go on again with her. "Are you nervous?"

"No," returned Helen; "but I think I heard Miss Lascelles say that—that—" She hesitated; she could hardly bring herself to speak of another woman as Avondale's wife, and yet she felt she must learn the truth—"that Mrs. Avondale was ill."

"Had you not heard of that before?" asked Fortescue. "She has been bad for some time; it is the most malignant form—the fourteen days', I think they call it."

Helen was distressed greatly, and leaned against the wall for support.

Fortescue pretended to be engrossed with the business on the stage, to give her time to recover herself; but the super, who was also waiting in the entrance for his cue to go on as the footman, looked with undisguised astonishment at her emotion.

The play seemed interminable to Helen that night, but at last all was over and she found herself on Broadway, that never-sleeping thoroughfare, with the noise of the continual traffic in her ears, the glare of lamps in her eyes, and the cool night air blowing on her temples.

She was earning a comfortable salary now, and no longer had the long, weary walk home, an omnibus, or at times even a carriage conveying her to her destination.

She stood under a lamp now, waiting for one of the former to pass, too occupied in her own thoughts even to be aware of the openly expressed admiration of many of the men who passed her, until a hand was laid upon her arm and she saw Richard Chester's tall form beside her.

"Oh, Mr. Chester," she exclaimed, "I'm so glad to see you! Is it true that she is ill?"

There was no need to mention any name; he knew well whom she meant.

"She has been," he said, gravely, "but it is all over now. Wilfred Avondale is free."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"That she died this evening."

"Died!" cried Helen, with a tearless sob. "Oh, God, forgive me, but sometimes I have wished her dead! If I could but recall those thoughts!"

"You do not regret her?" asked Chester, looking down tenderly on the white face of the woman he loved so well.

"No; how can I, who only saw her once?

And I do not think Wilfred cared for her much. I feel so guilty for having so often wished her dead in my jealous anger!"

"Avondale is free now," Chester said.

"Yes," she repeated, mechanically, "he is free."

"Miss Rossmore, do you realize all those words mean to you? Forgive my touching on a very painful and forbidden subject; but do you not see that it is now in his power to repair, in some measure, the wrong he did you?"

"You mean," she said, "that he is free to marry me?"

"I do."

"I never thought of that."

"Miss Rossmore, will you pardon an impertinent question? If Wilfred Avondale asked you to forget the past, and so allow him to make the only reparation in his power, would you do it?"

Helen covered her eyes with her hand.

"I cannot tell yet, Mr. Chester," she said. "I have never thought of it in that light. My love for him is dead. I have never spoken of this before, and would not do so to any one else. I can love him no longer, for my love was slowly but surely dying even before that dreadful day, now nearly a year ago, when it was trampled out. But still, if he offers me the legal right to the shelter of his name, I do not know what I should say. To be free from this dishonor—to be able to take my place among honest women, I would sacrifice almost anything."

"Helen!" he exclaimed—and in the excitement of the moment neither noticed that he used her Christian name—"do not speak in that manner! You are still one of the most honorable of women! You have been sinned against, not sinning!"

"Oh, Mr. Chester!" she exclaimed, "you alone of all the world except my father know that I believed myself his wife! You have kept my secret, and I thank you for it! Do not speak to me more now! Will you call a carriage? I must be alone! Come and see us tomorrow; we are always glad to see you!"

As she drove homeward that night beneath the stars, her eyes were dry and tearless, but a light, partly of pain and partly of something softer and more tender, burned in their depths.

"So loyal, so true, so kind, so honorable!" she murmured; "she will be a happy woman who gains his love—strong as a lion, tender and gentle as a woman!"

It was not of Wilfred Avondale she thought.

And Richard Chester went home that night with his mind in a whirl.

Of course, now that Avondale was free, he would make what atonement was in his power,

and marry the woman he had so cruelly wronged; and Richard Chester's love was so pure, so unselfish, in spite of his passionate nature, that he almost hoped such would be the case.

But time went on. Martha Avondale was laid to rest in Greenwood Cemetery, with all the pomp that Wilfred thought consistent with his dignity, and then that gentleman took room in the Brunswick, and began to lead a gay, butterfly, bachelor's life, without, apparently, troubling his head about Helen.

Chester's blood began to boil.

Loving Helen so truly himself, he could not understand this man's indifference to her.

It was all very well to say that this was no business of his; but as time went on he could bear it no longer, and he determined, on the earliest opportunity, to take Wilfred to account.

In the mean time Constance Clare's love-affair with Cecil Vaughan had been pretty much at a standstill.

That the young people were very fond of each other there could be no possible doubt, and were greatly distressed at Chester's refusal to give his consent to their engagement; but he, for once, allowing his own feelings to blind his better judgment, would not give way.

In point of fact, Cecil Vaughan was a very good fellow at heart—boyish and thoughtless, in spite of his eight-and-twenty years, it is true, but an honorable, upright, downright honest fellow at the core.

He had written the paragraph that had so annoyed Chester in his usual thoughtless spirit, and was very sorry when he saw that he had really done harm, although a feeling of pride prevented him from confessing it.

Constance for some time tried to persuade him to humble himself before her cousin, but not even his love for her would make the hot-headed young fellow do that, so Constance made up her mind to use her woman's wit and arts to seize the earliest opportunity of effecting a reconciliation between her lover and her cousin.

CHAPTER X.

TWO LATE.

THE day of the races, with aristocratic New York as spectator. Jerome Park, usually so bleak and cheerless, was now alive with a vast concourse of people.

Richard Chester was there, of course, having driven down with some sporting friends behind his dashing tandem, a dark chestnut wheeler and a dapple gray leader.

Constance and Mrs. Chester were comfortably seated in their victoria, with another friend or two.

Cecil Vaughan had hired a carriage, and come down with a literary *confrere* who wrote for a big daily, and was going to "do" the scene on the course for the benefit of our country cousins.

And Wilfred Avondale was there also, seated on the top of a millionaire's drag, flirting with some of the fairest and best women in the world, and looking, as he half-lay in the warm spring sunshine, the very ideal of a handsome artist.

He did not bet, and the ring having therefore few attractions for him, he remained with the ladies while the other men attended to the business of the day.

During all this time he had altered very little. He was still the graceful, handsome, selfish, egotistical, and yet to a certain degree talented man he always was.

Utterly heartless, or rather, living so entirely in the present that past impressions were forgotten as soon as the cause was removed, he seldom gave more than a passing thought to Helen Rossmore, the woman who had suffered so much for him—whose great, all-sacrificing love he had repaid by such a bitter wrong; and as for the woman he had made his wife in a mad moment of boyish romantic passion, believing he saw in the beautiful although uneducated and soulless village girl a fit companion for himself, that brief infatuation had died ere their eight months of early marriage life had half passed away; and when she had reappeared, after so long an absence that he had believed and hoped that she was dead, his only feeling during the short time she lived had been intense fear of her, and when she died at last, that changed to an equally great relief.

It never even occurred to his most selfish mind to marry Helen now, to try by every means in his power to wipe out the wrong he had done her.

He was only too pleased to find himself free to flirt and idle away his time at pleasure; painting for a few hours each day, it is true, in his luxurious studio, clad in violet velvet, and commanding wonderfully high prices for his pictures.

On that day he left the drag for a few minutes to execute some little commission for one of his fair companions, and as he was returning came face to face with Richard Chester.

It was the first time they had spoken since that evening in the house near Madison Square, when Wilfred had shielded himself behind Helen's unmerited shame.

Avondale colored hotly at finding himself thus unexpectedly confronted by Chester, and would have passed him without a word, but that Richard barred his path.

"I have waited for some time for this opportunity," said Chester, shortly. "Will you

grant me a few moments' conversation, Mr. Avondale?"

"Certainly," returned Wilfred, nervously.

"I saw Miss Rossmore the other day," began Chester. "She seems ill and anxious, and for the sake of the friendship I once bore you both, I determined to see you about her."

"About Helen?" said Wilfred, repeating the words mechanically.

Coward as he was, and conscious of having merited the contempt of every honest man, he was mortally afraid of noble, high-minded, loyal, courageous Richard Chester.

"Yes. In brief, Mr. Avondale, you are now a single man. You are free, and I ask you, do you intend to make Helen Rossmore your lawful wife?"

"I don't see it's any business of yours!" demanded Wilfred, getting sulky, but plucking up a feeble courage which was very near akin to despair.

"There I beg to differ. If you do not make Helen Rossmore your wife now, and if I chose to make known the truth of the story as I know it, you would be blackballed from every respectable club, and turned with disgrace from every honest man's door!"

"Do you threaten me?"

"No; I simply state facts. I know the whole story. I know that you committed bigamy by going through a ceremony of marriage with Helen Rossmore, while your wife, Martha Avondale, was alive; and I know that Miss Rossmore denied your second marriage, and so bore all the shame herself, in order that you might escape the consequences. If the story were told, what would be thought of you, a man (save the mark!) who could hide his own treachery behind a loving and innocent woman's undeserved shame; who could save himself at the expense of the good name and fair fame of the woman by the side of whom he had stood at the altar?"

Wilfred, always easily influenced, cowered before the other's righteous anger; and Chester, lashed into fury by his love and the remembrance of her wrongs, with the jealous gnawings of his own wounded and trampled-down heart, continued, seeming to tower in his passion like a giant above his shrinking listener.

"I speak strongly, because I feel strongly! Helen Rossmore was your wife when I first made your acquaintance! I saw her then, in those bygone days, and she won my sincere respect and esteem. I know how she has been wronged—what she has had to suffer—and I say again, that if you do not atone for the past I will fling you from my path like the craven wretch you must be, and let every man know what a cowardly, despicable creature it is they have called their friend!"

"What do you want me to do?" asked Wil-

fred, true to the last to his cowardly instincts.

"What your conscience, if you have one, and the few remnants of honor you must have left, bid you do! Ask not me! I have no right to control your actions. But I say again, I cannot, knowing as much of your life as I do—I cannot, in honor, stand by and see gentlemen (I use the word advisedly) treat you as a friend! They think they are speaking to one of themselves; and is it honorable of me not to undeceive them?"

"You think, then, I ought to marry Helen Rossmore?" asked Avondale.

He had, in his heart of hearts, no thought of doing so, but he was mortally afraid of this noble gentleman, and thought he had better seem to yield.

"I say again, ask your own honor!"

"I think you are right, Mr. Chester. I thank you for putting the matter thus plainly to me. Will you allow me to pass? Thank you. Good day."

And Wilfred Avondale went his way, and returned to his drag.

Richard Chester clinched his teeth and almost groaned aloud.

He loved Helen so fondly, so madly, so passionately, and yet so unselfishly.

His own hand now widened the gulf between them; but if she were made happy, no matter at how great a cost to himself, he would have his reward.

Constance Clare and Mrs. Chester left Jerome Park early, and reached home before the mass of the people had really started from the course.

After their return they sat at their window to watch those pass whose homeward road lay in that direction.

Presently a drag filled by those whom the ladies knew by report to belong to the fastest set in town came along the avenue.

The horses, although no longer fresh, had been so wantonly lashed as to be almost unmanageable; and the man who held the ribbons having won largely and drank deeply, was no longer in a condition to maintain his reputation as a first-class whip.

Even as this drag was passing, another carriage dashed up the side-street, causing the carelessly-driven and restive horses to shy.

Then they naturally backed suddenly, and one of them began to kick before the half-drunken driver could recover himself, or the footmen spring to the horses' heads.

As the horses backed, the carriage struck against the lamp-post, and almost overturned.

It recovered itself, however, and remained firm; but the sudden shock had caused one of the gentlemen who had been seated on the roof to lose his balance, and, with a sickening crash, he fell head-foremost to the curbstone.

Mrs. Chester, seeing the accident happen, as it were, almost on her doorstep, sent the old butler out to offer her house and all it contained to the injured gentleman, and while he was being borne in limp and senseless, the footman was dispatched with all haste for the nearest doctor.

"How annoying it is that Richard is out!" exclaimed Mrs. Chester to her niece. "We want a gentleman to act in this affair. How fortunate! There is Mr. Vaughan. Let me ask him to come in, and act as host for the nonce."

Constance, nothing loth, ran out herself to carry her aunt's message, looking very charming in her dainty gray dress, with rich crimson ribbons, which she had worn at the races.

But Cecil Vaughan was by no means willing to set foot in Chester's house during his master's absence; but, after a little time, Constance prevailed, and Vaughan went up stairs to hear the doctor's opinion of the injured man.

After some time, he came down again, and sought Constance and Mrs. Chester in the breakfast room.

His face was unwontedly grave—so grave, indeed, that Mrs. Chester read there the confirmation of her worst fears, and rose with the question:

"Great Heaven! Surely he is not dead?"

"No," said Vaughan, gently; "not dead. But the doctor says there is no hope. He has injured his spine in his fall, and cannot last the night. He knows the truth, and has asked me to see his wife."

"Who is he?" said Mrs. Chester. "Of course, we must send for her at once!"

"Do you not know," demanded Vaughan, "it is Wilfred Avondale, the artist?"

"His wife is dead," said Constance, puzzled.

"Yes; but he is asking for Helen Rossmore. You must have heard of her?"

"I have," interposed Mrs. Chester; "and, whatever she is, we must send for her at once. A dying man's wish must be respected."

"I know her address," said Vaughan, who was only too glad of an opportunity to repair in some measure the wrong he had once done Helen. "I will go to her, and break the news."

And thus it happened that Helen was told a gentleman wished to see her, and upon entering the parlor she saw, to her surprise, Cecil Vaughan.

Very gently he told her the truth, and she listened in silence. Then she hastily threw on her hat and cloak, and accompanied him back to the Chesters' house.

During the drive both were silent, and when the man-servant opened the door, Helen threw one glance at his grave face, and then quickly followed a waiting maid-servant up the stairs.

In a darkened room lay Wilfred Avondale,

his golden curls hidden by bandages, his handsome face livid with the hue of death.

By his side was Chester, (who had just returned home), and at the foot of the bed stood Mrs. Caester, who had allowed her tender, motherly nature to conquer, and had come upstairs with her son to see what could be done for the dying man.

Helen took no notice of either of them, but swiftly going to the bedside, knelt there, and took her husband's hand.

Richard and his mother would have withdrawn, but Wilfred motioned them to stay.

"Chester," he said, faintly, "you know how I have wronged Helen; she lied for my sake, for she firmly believed herself to be my wife. When I recover, Helen, I will atone."

When he recovered!

It was pitiful to see how the dying man clung to his last faint hope of life.

Over his last moments we must draw a veil; such deaths are too awful to bear the telling.

At last the terrible struggles ceased, and Helen knew that the hand she held was that of the dead.

Mrs. Chester (whose sympathies were now fully aroused on Helen's side), came forward and gently led her to another room, and when there, Helen fell on the kind, motherly breast, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XI.

ALL SHALL YET GO WELL.

WILFRED AVONDALE was buried by his wife's side in Greenwood, and a new and happier life began for Helen.

A distant relation, dying about the same time, left a small fortune to her father, and she determined to retire from the stage for a time at least.

Mrs. Chester, conscious in her heart of having misjudged her, now did all in her power to atone for the past, and Helen became a frequent visitor.

Cecil Vaughan and Richard Chester met on the night of Avondale's death, and partly by Constance's aid, their differences were settled; and Chester (always generous and open to conviction) acknowledged himself to have been in the wrong.

More than a year thus passed slowly away, and Helen, after that time of rest and freedom from care, looked younger and more handsome, in spite of her seven-and-twenty years, than when we first saw her.

She had greatly improved altogether; and the refined society of Constance and Mrs. Chester had not been without its good results.

Altogether, it was no wonder that Richard Chester was more in love with her than ever; and now that he knew she was perfectly free,

he began to think there was very little reason why his long untold love should remain untold any longer.

They were seated one night (the eve of Constance's wedding) in the drawing-room.

Chester produced some views, and laid them before Helen.

"What do you think of this house?" he asked, showing a picture of a Queen Anne cottage, its tall red chimneys and quaint gables being lifted from a thicket of embowering trees, and overlooking a beautiful flower-garden, where fountains played, and a flight of stone steps led down to the sea-shore.

"It is perfect!" exclaimed Helen. "Whose place is it?"

"Mine. You know, as Constance will so soon be married, my mother and I have decided to give up this house. I ran down to the coast, to see about a little villa within a drive of the Branch for my mother, and then I saw this place, and fell in love with it. Don't you think Mr. Rossmore would be pleased with it?"

"Yes; I am sure my father would be delighted with it. He is so fond of the country!" said Helen, wonderingly.

"This place seemed to me to combine everything we want in a home," went on Chester. "Within a few miles of Long Branch, and therefore easily accessible to New York, with beautiful country scenery and sea air, plenty of fishing, and that sort of thing, and I should say very good society—could you be happy there, Miss Rossmore?"

"Need you ask?" said Helen, jestingly.

"Of course," continued Chester, "the house itself wants painting, you know, but as my mother will live at the Branch, and I am no use at that kind of work, I shall have everything left as it is until my wife comes home, and then she can order things to her own taste."

The smile died from Helen's lips, and she became deathly pale.

"Your wife!" she faltered. "Oh! Mr. Chester, I did not know—"

He interrupted her.

"I am not engaged yet, Miss Rossmore. In truth I have not asked the lady's consent. I love her so truly, that I dread to put my fortunes to the test; my love makes me a coward."

She answered nothing. She could not bring her lips to speak, and he continued:

"If the lady will consent to reward my constancy—for I have loved her for years, though I never told my love—that is the home to which I should like to take her. If she refuses me, the seaside cottage will be again for sale, and I—Heaven help me—shall be more desolate than ever!"

Still she did not grasp his meaning. Her

enses seemed dazed by what he had told her.

During this conversation, Constance had been singing in the adjoining room, and in the pause, the refrain of her song fell clearly on the stillness:—

"Some may sing of the new love,
And some may sing of the old,
But only a few are faithful and true
To the love that never was told."

"Helen," he said, gently, "will my love consent to be my wife, or shall I have to sell Beach Villa?"

She looked up then, and in his eyes she read the truth.

There was no need of words. He saw by her face what her answer would be, and was content.

She loved him truly and well; not, perhaps, with the same great love she had given Wilfred Avondale, but with a strong, deep, holy love, born of gratitude and respect, strengthened and fanned into life by the honor and admiration in which she held him.

And so at last she found peace, and happiness, and rest from all storms and cares, in a happy home, where she was guarded by his ever-watchful love.

She promised to be his wife on Constance's wedding-eve, and, as she spoke the words, which neither of them ever regretted through all the happy after-life they were to spend together, once more the sweet words of the song rung out:

"Only a few are faithful and true
To 'The Love that Never Was Told.'"

THE END.

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